

Poeticizing the Academy: Poetic Approaches to the Scholarly Audiovisual Essay

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When I began writing my doctoral thesis on videographic film criticism in 2013, it was a practice still in the early stages of its development—at least in its digital online form since, as many scholars have stressed, there are analogue precursors. My main goal at the time was to examine the strategies through which the audiovisual essay conveys insights on film and media attained by “material thinking”¹—a sensuous thinking through with images, which finds in montage its key mode of expression. My main concern was that the results of my research would become irredeemably dated, especially since they addressed an ever-evolving phenomenon. I decided not to classify different typologies of video essays or apply rigid categories and schema, but instead focused on the formal features of videographic criticism (voiceover, split screen, superimposition and so on) in order to get a better understanding of how these audiovisual strategies work and cooperate with each other. Furthermore, I considered and analyzed both analytical, argumentative examples of videographic criticism and poetic ones that might not immediately be identified as scholarly.

In the final part of my thesis I argued for the potential of the audiovisual essay as a didactic instrument and a research methodology, since it seemed necessary at the time to demonstrate to the scholarly community the legitimacy of videographic criticism. It might be argued that such a defense is not needed anymore: there are a growing number of publications that accept audiovisual

contributions, an increasing acceptance of videographic works for career advancement, and the audiovisual essay is an acknowledged teaching and research practice. Still, it is worth asking the scholarly community the question this issue of *The Cine-Files* is aiming to address: what distinguishes scholarly videographic criticism?

As co-editor of *[in]Transition*, a journal devoted to videographic criticism and as a scholar who teaches the audiovisual essay and has adopted it as a research method, I have been pondering this question over the course of many years and my standards have changed. By way of example, in the last couple of years I have come to expect more rigor and consistency in my students' approach to videographic criticism. The playfulness and tentativeness of the attempts my students made the first year I taught a workshop on videographic criticism² are not enough anymore. This doesn't mean that I encourage them only to make explanatory videos. I just want them to avoid simply making, for example, very obvious comparisons, or to edit supercuts on recurring motifs without drawing through them any original and informed conclusion. If they are inclined to experiment with poetic play, in other words, I urge them more insistently than I would once have done to question its meaning, to ask what new awareness it has helped them to reach, as the poetic form does not always make one's line of reasoning explicit in the video itself. So, while I still give my students the freedom to choose the structure and the formal strategies they deem appropriate for their works, it is now oriented toward conveying innovative and convincing ideas.

The other reason for rethinking my standards is that, as videographic criticism has gained traction as a scholarly practice, there are more examples of outstanding and compelling scholarly works that constitute an effective model for students and practitioners. Moreover, there are now publications that offer helpful pedagogical suggestions for teachers and students: by way of example, the excellent work of Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell with the Middlebury workshop, *Scholarship in Sound & Image*,³ which is presented in the two editions of the book they edited (the second edition is also co-edited by Catherine Grant).⁴ Scholars, teachers, and students, therefore, have a collective knowledge base from which to approach videographic criticism as a study and research methodology.

Despite my change in thinking, I am still an advocate of playful, poetic, and less straightforwardly argumentative practices in videographic criticism, and I am going to argue for their academic value here. Poetic videographic work, as I intend to demonstrate, is part of those forms of practice-based

research that are essential, in my opinion, to advance knowledge in our field. Most importantly, poetic videographic forms can help us rethink traditional film/media studies methodological approaches, along with the assessment and evaluation criteria and labour routines that define, sometimes too rigidly and asphyxiatingly, the academy as institution.

A good explanatory video essay⁵—one that is clear and thorough without being redundant, one that demonstrates knowledge of the scholarly discourse around its topic and that takes full advantage of images, text (or voice) and editing—generally displays those features we usually consider essential in a scholarly work. It combines, as Kiss and van der Berg argue, “the more traditional, academically established and agreed scholarly standards with these new technological advancements.”⁶ From a pedagogical perspective, the explanatory video essay is also very effective: its argumentative structure makes it an essential resource for both other scholars and students. Such videographic references are now an integral part of my pedagogical practice, and showing and discussing audiovisual essays in class has proved to be very useful. By watching a compelling explanatory video, students see in front of their eyes, literally materialized, how film analysis and film theory can be developed from and through images, witnessing their inextricable bond. What may seem abstract or obscure on the written page—because it refers to an “absent object”⁷ or relies on a faulty memory—in the audiovisual essay acquires the concreteness, the material density of images and sound, and the reflections conveyed through voice over and/or through the written text (both essential in the explanatory video) are reified, even when they address the most abstract theoretical issues.

Things are different, however, when it comes to the poetic audiovisual essay. Watching a poetic work often presents a puzzling experience for both scholars and students: How am I supposed to interpret this? Is my interpretation the one the author wanted me to have? What does this have to do with scholarship? What is this adding to previous studies in the field? Even in the company and with the guidance of scholars who are familiar with experimental works and research outputs, poetic videos may be less-than-compelling or even off-putting for students; they have to try to grasp the meaning of the video, and then they have to familiarize themselves with the theoretical and analytical assumptions the work is based on, often by reading accompanying statements or bibliographical references. And even after they do so, the meaning might still be ungraspable or confusing. Assessing and grading poetic work is also challenging. We are usually asked to assess the quality of the scholarly papers of students and colleagues using such parameters as clarity, completeness, and an

adequate structure—the rubrics we use for peer assessment and review are usually structured in order to emphasize these aspects. Why, therefore, should we accept as scholarship poetic, playful, or even “amateurish” forms of videographic criticism, since they often fail to comply with these parameters?

Videographic criticism scholars and practitioners have answered these questions in many different ways. To those who criticized the use of the term “video essay” for more poetic and playful works that don’t adhere to the model of the scholarly essay, Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin replied by stressing the ambivalent and multifaceted meaning of the word “essay.”⁸ Demanding that the video essay be the audiovisual equivalent of a written scholarly essay means expecting it to comply with a “standard” form that differs from the personal, digressive essayistic form as Montaigne, for example, intended it. The rigid structure of the scholarly assignments students are asked to make, as Álvarez López and Martin argue, is “often duly expunged of what Adrian Miles has rightly and enthusiastically inventoried as the essay’s finest propensities toward ‘disjunction, exploration, asides, rambles, excursus, and even digression.’”⁹ The predominance of the traditional scholarly essay, however, is not justified by a univocal meaning of the term “essay,” and the introduction of new methodological instruments and new ways to produce and express scholarly knowledge, such as the videographic essay, offer the opportunity to consider more open-ended approaches to knowledge production and articulation than the traditional scholarly essay.

Indeed, this open-endedness was precisely the aspect of videographic criticism that compelled me in the first place. During the first year of my doctorate, while I was desperately trying to match the ideal model of the serious scholar, I encountered the work of scholars such as Catherine Grant, who were willing to leave their comfort zones by experimenting with video essays as a form of research and analysis. As Patricia Pisters argues, putting aside traditional forms of scholarship and skills painstakingly acquired through years of practice means sacrificing what we already know and becoming a neophyte; transitioning to videographic criticism is “a humbling experience” because it gives our research practice “an amateurish quality.”¹⁰ Such a risky choice, however, can foster those new discoveries that could not have happened through traditional or explanatory forms of scholarship. After all, twisting the words of Maya Deren somewhat, the amateur is she who “is never forced to sacrifice visual drama and beauty to a stream of words, words, words, words, to the relentless activity and explanations of a [topic].”¹¹ I am not suggesting, of course, that scholars should forgo explaining and elucidating concepts. Rather, videographic criticism as a methodology

offers the possibility to include, as I intend to argue, “visual drama and beauty” in scholarly activity without sacrificing all those goals that, in my opinion, are distinctive of a scholarly work: to produce and share new knowledge on a subject through a research and exploration process in which we confront ourselves with others (other scholars, but also writers, artists, intellectuals, with audiences, and so on), while contributing new and original ideas.

Although the poetic audiovisual essay might not always communicate theoretical insights with the same accuracy and precision as the expository one, it has a peculiar effectiveness, acknowledged by many scholars, in making the viewer feel and thus in sharing, the affective dimension of knowledge and of the research process. As Catherine Grant writes,

the sensuous and affective methodologies of videographic material-thinkers mean that the latter often immerse themselves differently, more completely, in the audio-visual forms of the medium they research and can move around to form new (scholarly and other) objects. In this kind of environment, the critical aspects of the work are inseparable from the creative, affective ones, and lend themselves so well, then, to the kind of exploration that Susan Sontag might have been calling for when she wrote: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”¹²

It should be noted that the scholarly poetic video very often relies on an accompanying exegesis in order to achieve criticality and to share new knowledge. One should not, however, be misled by its supplementation: the material work through and with the images is of pivotal importance in elaborating the theoretical and analytical insights. The work and writings of Catherine Grant are exemplary in this respect, since she has stressed on many occasions that the editing stage, the “material thinking,” is the initial and essential part of her research process. As R. Lyle Skains explains, the creative artifact in practice-based research still comprises a core aspect of the work, though “a full understanding [of the argument raised by the scholar] can only be achieved through the cohesive presentation of the creative artefact and the critical exegesis.”¹³ According to Skains, practice-based research aims to “push boundaries, to ask questions, to learn more about our art and our role within it”¹⁴ and its written supplementation is a way of sharing within the scholarly community the new knowledge that results from the creative process. The poetic videographic work, therefore, can make visible and “tangible” a research process that is often concealed in the written essay, as well as complement the written exegesis in offering the result of such process.

It is not my intention to imply that a poetic audiovisual essay is more valuable than an explanatory one, or to underestimate the fact that some of the most accomplished examples of videographic criticism actually combine both modes, in what has been described by Keathley and Mittell as a “third form.” Building on some reflections by Roland Barthes, they advocate for videographic criticism as an instrument to overcome the dichotomy between a rigidly analytical/deconstructive approach (“ideologize”) and an excessively hermetic one (“poeticize”):

But when working with moving images and sounds, the poetic force of the source materials cannot be ignored or avoided. [...] the most effective videographic works—those that produce the most potent knowledge effect—are those that employ their audiovisual source materials in a poetically imaginative way.¹⁵

Establishing the value of a scholarly work doesn’t always coincide with measuring its conformity to traditional parameters. The value of an essay, or of a video essay, is in the questions it raises, in its ability to use words (or images, or words and images) to suggest possible answers, and also in the way it stimulates, within the scholarly community, further thoughts, contributing to a larger conversation. In this regard, with the openness of its form, the poetic video essay is extremely effective, because it immediately invites the viewer to fill the gaps, to cooperate in discovering new meanings: a form of intellectual engagement that has great scholarly potential to produce new, shared knowledge within a field of study, to encourage participation and further hypotheses around a specific subject, and to inspire experimentation with unconventional methodologies.

It is not by chance, I believe, that some poetic works such as Catherine Grant’s *Carnal Locomotive*, or Jason Mittell’s deformative experiments stimulated other scholars to continue the conversations they started, or to find their own answers to the riddles posed. Indeed, in repurposing Grant’s methodology and aesthetic choices for *Carnal Locomotive* for his *Lizard Train*, Kevin Ferguson compares Grant’s strategies to those adopted in the film genre he works on, the *giallo*:

In her reflective essay, Grant describes the decision to explore the phenomenology of embodiment through videographic criticism, using the very frame I described of the *giallo*: because she “did not know what [she] was going to say... ; [she] just began with (bodily) feelings and only the merest hint of a (cognitive) hunch.”¹⁶

The gaps purposefully left open by Grant inspired Ferguson to play the same game. Using written text in a suggestive rather than explanatory form, the videographic epigraphs of Grant and Ferguson ask viewers to provide their own answers to the theoretical issues they raise, tying the knot between words and images, formulating hypotheses, but also trusting their bodily responses, particularly stimulated through the selected images, the sound, the pulsing and hypnotic pace of the videos.

Another interesting case is represented by Alan O’Leary’s *No Voiding Time*, a deformative experiment on *Inherent Vice*. The definition of “videographic deformation” has been coined by Jason Mittell, and it is based on Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann’s definition of “deformative criticism:” “an approach [that] strives to make the original work strange in some unexpected way, deforming it unconventionally to reveal its structure and to discover something new from it.”¹⁷ Through the self-imposition of formal parameters, Mittell has conducted some interesting experiments. For example: pechakucha videos are an exercise he devised with Christian Keathley, consisting of videos made of “ten video clips from the original source, each lasting precisely six seconds, overlaid upon a one-minute segment of audio from the original source”; 10/40/70 analyses are the assemblage of three shots, respectively at minute 10, 40 and 70 of a film; and the Equalized Pulse are videos that deform by “speeding up or slowing down each shot to last precisely as long as its average shot length”¹⁸. O’Leary did not replicate any of these particular strategies, but applied his own precise and complex formal deformative parameters to Paul Thomas Anderson’s film, which included dividing the screen into four frames, each corresponding to four tracks in the editing timeline, assigning each shot of the film in the timeline, in the furthest back available space, and regulating the volume of each soundtrack multiple times in order to switch the emphasis from one track to the other.¹⁹ The resulting video is a complex, layered artifact that doesn’t have the coherence of a mosaic or the precision or regularity of a puzzle. Instead, as O’Leary argues, it’s indebted to cubist paintings, from which the video derives its ability to make “time tangible and plastic”²⁰ through its juxtapositions and refractions.

By finding his inspiration in artistic, experimental practice rather than in traditional models of scholarship, O’Leary conceives his research practice in a different way, “not as the activity of answering questions about a given topic, but as a practical enquiry into the affordances of a method.”²¹ O’Leary’s work, in fact, aims at revealing something about the film primarily through the deformative experiment—namely, “to allow the sensorium that is the film [...] to find distilled

expression,”²² thus showing the nature of the aesthetic experience that *Inherent Vice* builds by privileging a temporality that isn’t conventionally linear. Above all, the work focuses on the possibilities offered by the method O’Leary designs: specifically, such a deformative approach engages with what he calls a “procedural” knowledge—that is, a new knowledge not only concerned with the subject of the experiment, but also with devising a research process that can be further applied. For O’Leary, the generative principles of his work are as crucial as its findings, and thus worthy of being investigated along with them, in order to lead the way to future developments: “practitioners of deformative methods in videographic scholarship can use their enquiries into film, television, games etc., to further refine and develop the capacities of deformative criticism as such.”²³

It is precisely for its ability to provide new knowledge about a film, but also to suggest new methodological approaches, that even in its experimental form, O’Leary’s video and accompanying reflection can be considered scholarship.

These poetic forms generate a fruitful dialogue within the scholarly community and activate a process of reflection on and experimentation with methodologies, something we should value as scholars. Even though the result of these poetic incursions may not always appear as scholarly *per se*, they initiate a process that includes precisely putting aside, forgetting momentarily—as Mittell and Keathley recall²⁴—our usual, scholarly mindset to privilege, instead, more creative, subjective, intimate approaches, to have a fresh, new look at what we as scholars are passionate about and are interested in understanding, in order to produce and share this new knowledge.

These “detours” from the traditional scholarly path are not, of course, entirely safe: we can get lost, or we can struggle to drive such subjective, singular experiences toward a result that can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in a field. Moreover, these detours require unlearning traditional methods and trying new approaches, ambitious undertakings that place great demand on that increasingly scarce resource in contemporary universities: time. Allowing ourselves the time to experiment with methods is hardly rewarded within academic systems that are driven to quantify publications and that find value primarily in successes rather than experiments. And even when the result of such poetic experimentations proves itself to be fruitful and fulfilling, it may still appear, to the eyes of some peers within the scholarly community, as a strange, bizarre *monstrum*.

In describing his most recent work, *Golden Gate*—a video essay (or essay film) that moves from the presence and representation, in several movies, of the iconic Golden Gate Bridge in order to address issues such as posthumanism, patriarchal masculinity and (non) cinema—William Brown uses the term “chthulumedial,” thus referring to Donna Haraway’s work.²⁵ It is indeed an effective definition, and not just because making an appearance in the video are tentacular, abyssal beings that recall the Lovecraftian Chthulu. The poetic audiovisual essay by Brown, with its visual and aural loops, its juxtapositions, its irony, and the dialectic between sound and images it produces, recalls the physical and metaphorical features of the “tentacular ones”: “The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others.”²⁶

We could maybe consider poetic forms of videographic criticism as a means for the tentacular ones to find their way into academia, in order to introduce new practices, to attempt new approaches: after all, as Haraway reminds us, “*tentacle* comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, meaning ‘feeler,’ and *tentare*, meaning ‘to feel’ and ‘to try.’”²⁷ Or we could think of poetic videographic criticism as a *tactic*—in the sense that De Certeau attributes to the term²⁸—that destabilizes the established methodologies within our scholarly institutions, their assessment criteria, and standardized procedures. Such tactics are not aimed at discerning, ordering, categorizing; instead, they even give up on their autonomy, because “the space of a tactic is the space of the other.”²⁹ By infiltrating the space of the academy, poetic videographic criticism destabilizes its traditional structures by introducing forms of contamination through art, experimental cinema, playful games, amateur practices, autobiographical ones and so on. By challenging traditional, well-established definitions of scholarship, to which it is nonetheless strictly related, the poetic videographic essay reminds us of the nature of the academy as a power structure, one that is historically, culturally and socially determined, and whose conventions, therefore, can (and must) be constantly redefined.

The connection between creative practice and tactics has been made in a recent, eye opening article written by Isabelle McNeill, Louise Haywood and Georgina Evans, “Tactics and Praxis: a Manifesto,” which argues that “bringing creative praxis into institutional space enables us to rethink academic labour,” thus challenging the norms of an output-oriented system that has shaped the work of scholars around values such as efficiency and productivity.³⁰ With regard to academic writing, by

way of example, the authors underline how it is common to organize texts in a “coherent and stable structure” which implies a linear and invisible path aimed at producing results:

... the paths travelled to produce “outputs” must be meticulously effaced in the final product. This includes all aspects of the creative process, such as the often strange, personal reasons we are drawn to particular topics, as well as the circuitous, emotionally complex labour involved in reaching our tentative conclusions and shaping them into text.³¹

Conversely, the poetic videographic essay exhibits quite often the “strange, personal reasons” hidden behind the choice of the subject, as well as “the circuitous, emotionally complex labour involved in reaching our tentative conclusions.”

Indeed, among the scholars whose work inspired the article, there is Catherine Grant, who participated in the seminars organized by the authors of the manifesto at the Faculty of Modern & Medieval Languages and Linguistics at the University of Cambridge (the manifesto is inspired by the experience of these seminars). Grant’s work, once again, constitutes the quintessential example of a “process that rejects traditional models of research, publication and singular authority, in favour of a relinquishing of full control and ownership and a recognition of the porous boundaries between the inside and outside of the self.”³²

We tend to think that the uncertainties we face need to be contained in grids, categorized, immediately brought back to a familiar, reassuring order, one that allows us to carry on pursuing the myth of productivity at all costs—a myth that, in the current circumstances, has shown its limitations. As an open form, one that cannot be easily categorized, the poetic video reminds us that doing research means considering processes, not just results, and these processes are expressed in ways different from what we are used to. I still want to watch extraordinary and remarkable explanatory works that expand my knowledge, but I would also like the scholarly community to acknowledge that scholarly thinking can express itself also through open, destabilizing forms. This makes the research process endless, challenging, sometimes more frustrating than satisfying, and yet vital and stimulating. I am also convinced that students would benefit from such a change of perspective: Not everything, in both their scholarly and personal experience, will present the clear, organized, and controllable form of the five-paragraph essay. Although, as I note in my introduction, I now ask my students to approach video essays more seriously and rigorously, it is not necessarily to conform to the model of the traditional scholarly essay. Rather, I want to make sure that they do not associate

the poetic or playful form with disengagement, but that they consider and explore its reflective and critical scope.

We are asked to contribute to scholarship in increasingly bureaucratized, rigid forms, and to assess the quality of our students' work in terms of grades, percentage, course credits, even though we are facing a significant change in both our life and work conditions. The extraordinary situation we are currently experiencing shows how delusional it is to think we can contain the unexpected through the overly-standardized forms of access and sharing of knowledge currently designed. I think it is essential, instead, to imagine a different future, one that is open to alternative research processes and to different ways to express and share our knowledge, ways that do not adhere to rigid standards. Videographic criticism should keep poeticizing the academy.

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