

Notes on the Scholarliness of Videography

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I think of video essays as being able to deal with pretty much everything that scholarly articles can: the work can be analytical, theoretical, historical etc. Of course, there are things that video essays don't lend themselves particularly well to, such as situating one's contribution in the context of previous research. You wouldn't want to start your video essay with a detailed review of the relevant literature, for example. Then there are things that video essays are really good at, most obviously studying the visual and aural aspects of film/media texts. What I find most enticing is that the means of expression are also means of thinking, so making a video essay instead of writing a paper may not just give you a different take on the same filmic features, but prompt you to take on other features in the first place.

Academic journals that publish peer reviewed video essays, such as *[in]Transition* and *Screenworks*, have found some quite clever ways to gently guide the format in a useful scholarly direction. I'm thinking, in particular, of the practice of publishing an author's statement and the reviewers' comments in conjunction with each video essay, which is designed to encourage open debate and reflection on scholarly conventions and criteria for videographic work. And the stipulation that submissions should produce new knowledge is an eminently reasonable requirement for scholarship. Apart from that, the guidelines legislate for what I think of as productive pluralism, explicitly welcoming contributions from non-academics, and specifying that the work can be any length.

To ask what constitutes a *scholarly* video essay is to raise questions about academic norms and standards. Typically, disciplinary boundaries are policed above all by reference to analytic, argumentative, and methodological rigor, though there is often substantial disagreement on criteria both between and within scholarly fields and traditions. Generally, however, the authority of academic knowledge tends to rest on the display of the *apparatus* of knowledge, which includes not least the mobilization of a machinery of citations and attributions. I want to argue that it would be a bad idea to require videographers to furnish their work with a similarly sturdy bulwark of notes and references so as to conform to the convention that new scholarship is expected to engage explicitly and comprehensively with relevant instances of previous scholarship. It's not that the affordances of the video essay are somehow intrinsically incapable of imitating or accommodating the principles and practices of written research. But there are good reasons to think that some of the orthodoxies that signify mastery and bestow legitimacy in the context of written scholarship would distract and detract from the unique strengths of videographic scholarship, namely its sense of immediacy. To my mind, the forte of the video essay is first and foremost its capacity to cite and engage with audiovisualcy itself rather than to cite and engage with the written records of pertinent disciplinary traditions. The two are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but videography seems to me to require more leeway in how it strikes a useful balance on a case-by-case basis.

Another reason I don't think it makes sense to map the procedures of traditional research onto videography is that I fear it would adversely affect its potential reach. The fetishization of the apparatus of knowledge tends to fence off and insulate scholarship, so I really appreciate the relative freedom that video essayists currently enjoy, because it facilitates the building of bridges to other areas of culture, such as the art world on the one hand and journalistic/fan work on the other. This has made for a broader community of video essayists, which includes not just scholars but also critics, students, and filmmakers. I hope that, as videography becomes gradually more academically institutionalized and "disciplined," our efforts to distinguish the scholarly from the non-scholarly do not end up just introducing into the hamlet of makers and viewers special zones for scholars and non-scholars.

I realize that arguing for a reasonably elastic notion of scholarship for videographic work comes at a cost. The rough distinction between expository and exploratory works stands out immediately as a thorny issue. I must admit that, in the absence of explicitly stated premises and arguments, it can be

exceedingly difficult to evaluate experimental video essays *as scholarship*, even with an author's statement for guidance. One reasonable measure of scholarliness has to do with the degree to which a work seeks to, and succeeds in, spelling out its epistemological aims and claims (be that in the form of a voiceover narration or an author's statement). It's not that works with explicitly formulated ideas and arguments are inherently epistemologically superior, but rather that they lend themselves more readily to epistemological assessment. It's simply harder to come to a consensus on the merits and demerits of works that aim to provoke thinking in the abstract than it is for works that aim to articulate the concrete results of thinking. Personally, I'd prefer to see slightly more video essays that reach beyond having a certain suggestiveness, and that strive to pull ideas more sharply into focus. My impression is that there's no shortage of submissions that offer food for thought, but ample room for contribution with more of a digestive purpose.

This, however, is not a petition for videography to pursue a narrower and more homogeneous notion of scholarship. In the realm of scholarly print journals there has been a proliferation of special sections—essays, notes, reviews, interviews, commentary etc.—that supplement the article as the “proper,” peer reviewed unit of scholarship. It's possible to envisage something similar for journals dedicated to videographic work, though I'm worried that it might over-incentivize particular forms of video essays and discourage the kind of cross-fertilization that seems to me to have served the field well so far. In fact, I find it quite refreshing that academic outlets for video essays subject such a wide variety of works to peer review, thus ensuring that scholarly norms and ideals exert a sensibly discreet gravitational pull.

In my experience, academics are in any case quite capable of appraising the specifically scholarly virtues of various forms of videographic work when it's called for by institutional imperatives, like committee work. The bigger obstacle, I suspect, is a rather different set of institutional imperatives, namely the administrative craving for measuring and quantifying academic output. The New Public Management mindset that has colonized higher education requires a ready-made, hierarchical taxonomy for different types of scholarship, and that mindset is hard for us academics to stay unaffected by as well. But if we internalize these rules, we'll soon find ourselves contemplating absurd questions about the fairness of the game, and worrying how to calibrate intellectual effort and institutional rewards: *how much labor typically goes into a scholarly article versus a scholarly video essay? does it really make sense to classify a two-minute video essay and a twenty-minute video*

essay as the same unit of scholarship? I believe these are bad questions, and that to break free from the logic that prompts them in the first place calls for a different sort of academic virtue: the insistence that scholarship ought to be motivated not by strategic calculations but by intellectual curiosity, wherever that takes us.

Ultimately, there's no way to eradicate the tensions and contradictions that inevitably emerge from efforts to negotiate the parameters of scholarliness. We simply can't have all the pros and none of the cons. But my pragmatic view is that, for the time being at least, videography has less to gain from seeking to delimit as clearly as possible the terrain of the scholarly in pursuit of academic conformity than from seeking to extend it in pursuit of plurality and connectivity.

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