

Writing About the Scholarly Video Essay: Lessons from *[in]Transition*'s Creator Statements

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Introduction

On 14th October 2007, film critic Jim Emerson published an article on the movie close-up, featuring screengrabs of close shots that had enraptured him, accompanied by a short, written commentary on each.¹ In the article, Emerson noted that he wished he “could actually cut the film together,” but that he lacked the technical skills to do so. Just four days later, Emerson had evidently acquired these skills, publishing a short blog post about a “cinematic essay” he had made based on the written article.² Now utilising the tools that could set the close-ups in motion and connect them through editing, Emerson claimed the cinematic essay represented what he had really “wanted to say” in the original article. Replying to the post, film scholar Christian Keathley commented:

What you've taken on here is, I think, the next important step in film criticism. We can now “write” using the very materials that constitute our object of study: moving images and sounds. But doing this demands re-thinking conventional critical forms. Lots of experimenting must be done, and yours is an important installment. Congratulations.³

Implicit in both Emerson and Keathley's statements is the idea that film criticism constructed through moving images and sounds can perform thinking in ways inaccessible to the written word (surely part of the “conventional critical form” to which Keathley alludes). Ironically, the link in the post to Emerson's video no longer works,⁴ so reading the exchange today, only the written word remains.

This suggests something about the persistence of traditional forms of critical communication in the face of the wide-ranging, ephemeral forms of experimentation with audiovisual film criticism that have appeared online since Emerson's post. Especially within an explicitly scholarly context, videographic criticism has involved a great deal of writing (meant in the sense that does not require quotation marks). There have been book-length treatises on the subject, PhD theses, numerous special editions of academic journals (including this one) and several one-off articles, often featuring video creators reflecting on their own practice.

This article contributes to the word count of this ongoing discourse by discussing how video essayists have framed their work through supplementary writing. Specifically, I survey the creator statements produced to support videos published in *[in]Transition*, "the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic film and moving image studies."⁵

The decision to incorporate writing into the publishing practices of *[in]Transition* was a strategic one, designed to "set the terms of evaluation for videographic work, and contextualize it for acceptance and validation by our discipline."⁶ The open publication of peer reviews alongside the videos is an important part of this strategy and has been reflected upon by Jason Mittell in an article for *Cinema Journal*.⁷ Mittell suggests that both the creator statements and peer reviews "strive to answer the question, 'How does this video function as scholarship?'"⁸ The creator statements constitute only a small fraction of writing about videographic practice within academia (and even within *[in]Transition*), but they provide a unique opportunity to assess how the people who make video essays about audiovisual texts and culture frame what they do in writing and justify it in scholarly terms.

The following is a broad survey of typical themes based on my analysis of the 104 creator statements that have been published in *[in]Transition* to date.⁹ I read through each statement, assigning keywords to describe the main preoccupations in the writing. I then noted how many times particular themes repeated themselves and grouped the keywords together in three broad categories: 1. writing that describes the content of the video and its specific critical context; 2. writing that provides information on the production context and reflects on process; and 3. writing that considers the function of particular stylistic choices and, more generally, the affordances of videographic criticism as a scholarly form. Rather than focusing on specific examples, the remainder of this article takes a

taxonomic approach, in order to provide an overview of the ways the video essay has been characterised as scholarly within a representative body of academic writing.

Writing on Content and Critical Context

The most common components of the creator statements are summaries of video content (appearing in nearly one half of the statements) and reviews of critical writing that relate to the specific topic being addressed in the audiovisual work (over half of the statements). These elements are the least relevant for the purposes of this article, as they do not address the question of what makes the video essays scholarly, but their prevalence is noteworthy, especially because they are neither mentioned nor encouraged by the *[in]Transition* contributor guidelines, which call for:

a 300-1000-word supporting statement that articulates the research aims and process of the work as well as the ways in which those aims are achieved in the audiovisual form.¹⁰

The focus on content and critical context in many of the statements suggests a deliberate strategy by creators to use writing to supplement the argumentative qualities of the audiovisual work (rather than to discuss aims and process). In such cases, the attention to these elements in the writing may be necessary to provide critical support for audiovisual work whose scholarly value isn't immediately apparent. The prevalence of this kind of writing in the creator statements indicates the willingness of *[in]Transition* to publish videographic work that challenges the notion of argumentative self-sufficiency. There are those, however, like Miklós Kiss, who critique the “outsourcing [of] argumentation to accompanying writing,” stating that it betrays “a lack of trust in the videographic format.”¹¹

Writing on Production Context and Process

Another common strand in the writing is attention to the circumstances that saw the video come into being and reflection on the choices made during the production process. Even when the accounts of circumstances are purely descriptive and anecdotal, they begin to establish the scholarly credentials of the video essayist by highlighting their other research activities and the academic outputs to which the video production relates. In these instances, the videos are cast as “scholarship by association,”

whether because they complement a particular piece of (usually written) research by the same author or because they are part of larger research projects whose dimensions are described in the creator statement.

A number of creator statements also delve into the details of production choices, commenting on how these choices helped to generate the analytical insights offered in the final product. Occasionally this involves the creator making a claim for the scholarly value of utilising technologies beyond the video essay norm of non-linear editing software (e.g. eye tracking software, programs originally designed for medical imaging, mapping technology). More commonly, the statements point to the benefits of imposing parameters on the production process, as a way of defamiliarizing the source material for the purpose of gaining critical insight. This is very much in keeping with the philosophy underpinning the online collection, *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*¹² and the Middlebury College Scholarship in Sound and Image workshops, from which *The Videographic Essay* derives. This is not at all surprising, given that a good proportion of the videos published in *[in]Transition* were developed through the workshops and that the online collection is a key reference point for academic practitioners in the field.

There are two other ways in which the scholarly value of the production process is commonly described, each suggesting somewhat different benefits of researching videographically. Firstly, a number of statements point to the virtues of compiling audiovisual material on the editing timeline. Whilst creators may have an initial motivation for selecting particular audiovisual sequences to import into their editing software, some statements highlight the way that engagement with these moments on the timeline influences the analytical outcomes. According to this claim, practitioners become more intensely focused on the material by working on it within a timeline, noticing new patterns/connections as a result.

Secondly, a claim is sometimes made that, when taken apart on the editing timeline, the media object, in and of itself, begins to “teach” the creator. Whilst both notions describe the editing process as a revelatory one, the levels of agency attributed to the creator are expressed differently: in the first case, emphasis is placed on the acuity of the scholar practitioner, whose powers of critical insight are deemed to be heightened by the scrutiny involved in compiling material within the timeline; in the second instance, the focus is on the potency of the editing process itself, if it is conducted according to a particular set of rules. The claim is made that such processes defamiliarize the source

material, with the result that an entirely novel understanding of the audiovisual text is generated. These kind of statements represent the strongest adherence to the ethos promoted in *The Videographic Essay*, and, in particular, the maxim that “formal parameters lead to content discoveries.”¹³

If this latter notion casts the creator more as the beneficiary of a process that takes on a life of its own, rather than as an active researcher in the traditional sense, some of the statements, at least partially, consider production choices without reference to notions of academic research at all. These instances are often included in statements that highlight the relationship of the video work to experimental film practice, placing as much importance on “what makes these videos a particular kind of film experience” as they do on the central question the statements are supposed to answer: “how does this video function as scholarship?” The key criterion for publication in *[in]Transition* is that a video should “produce new knowledge about its subject, or about film and moving image studies.”¹⁴ Arguably, aspects of statements that consider production choices as solely creative, rather than research-related, decisions, turn the question of knowledge creation away from a particular audiovisual object of study, and onto the interpretive process of the creator and/or potential viewer. That said, such statements rarely exist on their own: the norm is for a consideration of processes that are not attributed to tangible research outcomes to co-exist with statements that do try to assert the value of production choices in enabling the critical analysis of a particular object of study.

Writing on Videographic Criticism as a Scholarly Form

Many creator statements do directly tackle the issue of what makes their videos scholarly, either through attention to the use of particular formal techniques or through a more fundamental consideration of the qualities of videographic criticism as a scholarly form. On the level of individual techniques, the aspects that attract most commentary, in terms of their scholarly purpose, are (in ascending order) the use of: freeze-frames; onscreen text; multi-screen; montage; and sound (often revolving around the use or omission of voiceover).

In addition, some statements consider the relationship between the format adopted by the video and its scholarly purpose. These range from a contextualisation of the video within well-established

filmmaking practices (e.g. the aforementioned experimental film and the documentary) to the discussion of the use of more recent “born digital” formats, such as the fanvid, the supercut, the epigraphic video and the desktop documentary.

Most commonly, the creator statements are used to comment on the relationship between videographic criticism and other forms of research practice, the key contrast being with scholarship that is rooted in the written word. Whilst there is occasionally reflection on the potential limitations of video work in comparison with traditional forms of scholarship, the majority of statements focus on promoting the unique qualities of audiovisual thinking. Through my note-taking, I have identified six common ways in which the scholarly value of videographic criticism is asserted:

(1) Video essays offer clarity of illustration.

This kind of statement tends to occur in relation to videos that are clearly explanatory. The directness through which salient clips can be presented is valued as a key factor in affording the work its explanatory tone.

(2) Video essays about moving images and sound allow medium-specific qualities to be appreciated more vividly than written criticism allows.

A number of the videos curated in *[in]Transition* involve the analysis of camera movement, and the ability of videographic criticism to display the cinematographic elements under analysis is particularly valued. This type of statement mirrors the sentiment expressed by Christian Keathley back in 2007,¹⁵ in which the ability to write through moving images and sounds is seen as the defining, and most exciting, possibility of videographic form.

(3) The scholarly value of video essays is enhanced by their association with (popular) internet culture.

A number of statements consider the relationship between videographic scholarship and popular online forms and/or the potential for video essays to thrive in an online context. In these cases, the playfulness of the video’s address is highlighted as a positive quality that connects academic research to a wider world, without undermining its scholarly value.

(4) The video essay utilises its moving images and sounds to produce meaning in an affective register that the written word cannot achieve.

This sentiment is expressed frequently and coheres with ideas explored in longer form writing about videographic criticism. The perception that videographic criticism “feels” its way through arguments, as well as, or instead of, stating them verbocentrically, is key to the way many of the creators describe their work.

(5) Meaning making in videographic criticism is participatory.

This kind of statement suggests, positively, that the authorial control of videographic criticism is less secure than is the case with traditional written scholarly forms. This relinquishing of control is evidenced through: statements about audiovisual criticism’s affective qualities (which may “hit” viewers in different ways); claims about the potential excess of meaning generated through the direct presentation of audiovisual material (rather than the cherry-picking of detail that writing about sound and image involves); and the advocacy of non-didactic argumentative strategies that require the viewer to engage in their own interpretative work.

(6) Interpretation is not foreclosed through videographic criticism.

Related to the above, a common sentiment in the statements is that video essays constitute a more “open” form of criticism than traditional written scholarship. Ambiguity of argumentation is turned into a positive scholarly value in these accounts, and this kind of statement is much more prevalent in *[in]Transition* than those which make calls for the video essay to match up to the qualities of lucidity and legibility associated with traditional academic writing.

Conclusion

The acceptance of ambiguity as a positive value in videographic scholarship is a distinctive feature of the creator statements in *[in]Transition*. At least ten of the statements argue forcefully (or unambiguously!) against a fixed reading of the video work they accompany. On the other hand, a smaller number of creators do valorise video essays for their ability to deliver precise, detailed and clear critical analyses of their objects of study. In these ways, views on the scholarly potential of

video essays can be seen to be split along the lines of the poetic and explanatory, the terms Christian Keathley invented, influentially, to describe different tendencies in videographic film criticism.¹⁶ The key scholarly virtues of video essays lie in their openness to multiple interpretations and their invitation to “feel” the criticism affectively (the poetic mode); or they lie in their ability to facilitate a “direct” form of textual analysis that allows close readings to be performed vividly and clearly (the explanatory mode).

This does, however, suggest too absolute a polarisation between the different modes of address. It is notable that Keathley’s poetic/explanatory continuum, when discussed explicitly in the creator statements, is evoked so that the writers can make claims that their work operates in both registers. Identifying and itemising the key themes evident in the creator statements in *[in]Transition* is hopefully of use in terms of taking stock of (one aspect of) the written discourse that surrounds the publication of video essays in a scholarly context. However, the most valuable pieces of self-reflective writing are likely to be ones that account for the complexities of what the video essay was trying to achieve, without forcing the work too narrowly into pre-existing categories.

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1. Jim Emerson, “Close-Ups: A free-association dream sequence,” posted October 14, 2007, <https://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/close-ups-a-free-association-dream-sequence>, accessed June 30, 2020.

2. Jim Emerson, "Close Up: The movie/essay/dream," posted October 18, 2007, <https://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/close-up-the-movieessaydream>, accessed June 30, 2020.
3. Christian Keathley, replying to Jim Emerson, "Close Up: The movie/essay/dream," posted October 18, 2007, <https://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/close-up-the-movieessaydream>, accessed June 30, 2020.
4. The video is still viewable on Jim Emerson's Vimeo page: <https://vimeo.com/7428123>, accessed June 30, 2020.
5. <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/how-it-works>, accessed June 30, 2020.
6. <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/how-it-works>, accessed June 30, 2020.
7. Jason Mittell, "Opening Up [in]Transition's Open Peer-Review Process," *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 4, Summer 2017: 137-141.
8. Ibid, 138.
9. Up to and including issue 7.1. There are more than 104 entries listed as creator statements in the journal, but some of these are actually written by the curator, rather than creator, of a particular video. I have also excluded the creator statements of practitioners who submitted purely audio work for the special issue on audiographic criticism (6.2).
10. <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/how-it-works>, accessed June 30, 2020.
11. Miklós Kiss, "Videographic scene analyses, part 2," *NECSUS*, Autumn 2018, <https://necsus-ejms.org/videographic-scene-analyses-part-2/>, accessed June 30, 2020.
12. Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant (eds), *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/index>, accessed June 30, 2020.
13. Ibid, accessed June 30, 2020.
14. <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/how-it-works>, accessed June 30, 2020.
15. Christian Keathley, replying to Jim Emerson, "Close Up: The movie/essay/dream," posted October 18, 2007, <https://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/close-up-the-movieessaydream>, accessed June 30, 2020.
16. Christian Keathley, "La Camera-Stylo: Notes on video criticism and cinephilia," in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, ed. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (London: Routledge, 2011), 176-191.