# New Audiovisual Vernaculars of Scholarship

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When it comes to the question "What makes a scholarly video essay?" I admit to an orientation that tends towards the iconoclastic: put a video essay in front of me and I am more likely to be drawn to how it challenges rather than affirms prevailing categorical definitions of scholarly and non-scholarly. So reluctant am I to give a hard definition to "what makes a scholarly video essay?" that I typed the question into Google to see what had already been proposed. I found four results that are diverse in their respective emphases and collectively not as definitive as I expected:

The Wellesley College website has a page about scholarly video essays that focuses on their qualities of argumentation and demonstration of thought, distinguishing them from "a fan tribute or a simple mash-up of favorite clips," which I would label examples of "vernacular" forms of video essays.[1] Here we see issues of *scholarly or critical intention and rhetorical address within the video* being the defining factors of a scholarly video essay.

The online academic journal *[in]Transition*, widely recognized for its efforts to legitimize the video essay as academic scholarship, accounts for its approach towards legitimization through three elements in their publication process: curation by an editorial panel; textual accompaniment (the video must always have a curatorial statement, as if scholarship produced in an audiovisual form cannot yet stand on its own); and peer review by an academic cohort.[2] Here we see issues of *scholarly process and context around the video* being the defining factors.

The Middlebury Videographic Criticism workshop, acclaimed for establishing pedagogical methodologies for producing scholarly video essays, approaches the parameters governing the scholarly video essay as still-to-be-determined through an ongoing process that reflects a historical moment of transition for academic scholarship: "Most scholars are not trained to conceptually engage with moving-image media as a mode of scholarly rhetoric, and academic fields have not reconciled how to position such work as part of systems of research, professional development, and peer-review."[3] Here we see a consideration of the authorial constituency—in this case, *scholarly practitioners who are in the process of applying their largely text-based research practice to a newly adopted audiovisual mode*—as a determining factor for defining what a scholarly video essay is. Perhaps it's a tautology to state "a scholarly video essay is a video essay produced by a scholar," but from what I have observed, this logic seems to inform much implicit justification for a range of disparate works being positioned by their respective creators as scholarly. I have seen examples of what the Wellesley College website might describe as "a fan tribute or a simple mash-up of favorite clips" being positioned as videographic scholarship for no apparent reason other than that its maker had scholarly credentials. This raises the matter of who has agency in the platforms and processes that determine the definitions and criteria for scholarship. Who is served by these criteria, and who isn't? These are questions that should not be taken for granted.

On the website for his Videographic Film & Media Studies course at Middlebury, Jason Mittell reflects further on the transitional thinking necessitated by the scholarly video essay: "Such a change means rethinking the rhetorical modes traditionally used in scholarly writing, and incorporating more aesthetic and poetic elements alongside explanation and analysis."[4] This call for a greater engagement with rhetorical and aesthetic possibilities brings me back to the definition found on Wellesley's website, that the academic video essay should "essentially demonstrate that the audiovisual can be a form that thinks," as distinguished from the vernacular modes. Applying Mittell's call to rethink traditional scholarly rhetoric, I ask (rhetorically), why couldn't vernacular modes such as mashups, fan videos, and any number of new and emerging forms (TikTok videos, Instagram stories, Twitch livestreams) be forms that think? I would argue that audiovisual media itself was the original "vernacular" mode that scholarship incorporated into its thinking practice, which previously had been validated exclusively via the written word. Scholarship now has access to a stunning and ever-expanding range of media discourses through which it can apply its thinking practices. In doing so, it can bring to them much-needed scholarly insight and criticality.

The question remains, however, which scholarly criteria and standards ought to be upheld throughout this grand vernacularization of scholarly practice that digital media has helped bring about. On this question, I am afraid I can offer nothing concretely definable or precisely measurable. I could bring up the traditional conventions of proper citation, references that build upon existing scholarship, and a certain mode of writing (or in this case, media making) that is recognizable as "academic." But without getting into my own tortured history with academic scholarship, I find that these considerations can distract from the chance to recognize a mind in the act of demonstrating its thinking process as applied to a subject, however that mind might express itself. At least in the vernacular arenas, video essays have opened up the possibilities for a greater range of critical intellects, including my own, to be recognized outside of traditional academia. I hope that, whatever standards and conventions of evaluation for scholarly video essays emerge in the years to come, they will give due consideration to engaging with the new vernaculars of audiovisual expression, for all the intellects and insights they can afford.

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1. "Academic video-essays have a clearly identifiable argument, they rely on 'serious' research and essentially demonstrate that the audiovisual can be a form that thinks." Maurizio Viano, "Welcome to the video essay," Wellesley College, accessed July 28, 2020, https://www.wellesley.edu/lts/bli/projects/viano.

2. "About [in]Transition," [in]Transition, accessed July 28, 2020, http://mediacommons.org/intransition/about.

3. "What is Videographic Criticism?" Scholarship in Sound & Image Workshop on Videographic Criticism, Middlebury College, accessed July 28, 2020, https://sites.middlebury.edu/videoworkshop/what-is-videographic-criticism/.


4. Jason Mittell, "Course Overview," Videographic Film & Media Studies, Middlebury College, accessed July 28, 2020, https://sites.middlebury.edu/videographiccourse/.