

In Search of Academic Legitimacy: The Video Essay Between Disciplines, Online Film Culture, and Traditional Text-Based Scholarship

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As an American Studies scholar, trained to produce written texts, to put ideas into words and arrange them around an argumentative structure that is easy to follow (not least because that structure itself is so familiar to readers), I am both fascinated and challenged by the affordances of the scholarly video essay for cultural studies approaches to film and media. I expect the scholarly video essay to make an academic argument and to lay open the thought process that went into making that argument. That is, in fact, what I expect from written scholarship as well. But the audiovisual mode has its very own possibilities and constraints, offering a different perspective on the object of study, new, creative ways to work with the material, develop ideas, and think through cultural theory and concepts, and the chance to communicate research findings in an engaging, accessible manner. Material exploration is a vital part of making a video essay. For me, an academic without any background in film production, working with “an archive of images and sounds”¹ to produce a new media object is an exciting and immensely rewarding endeavor—not least because it raises conceptual, theoretical, and methodological questions that force me to stop and rethink academic arguments, to recalibrate structure and rhetoric, to reconsider the relationship between form and content, and to follow my artistic impulses. All this makes videographic criticism a creative, critical,

and performative academic practice,² a unique method for doing and presenting research in the digital age. But what exactly constitutes a scholarly video essay?

Although videographic criticism is still relatively new, it is already rehearsing a foundational narrative of medium specificity and academic legitimacy. Such accounts are invested in establishing genealogical links to the essay film and documentary formats, while also distinguishing the scholarly video essay from the tone and style of popular film reviews, supercuts, and “explainer” videos on YouTube. A growing number of theoretical reflections are intent on staking out the scope of the scholarly video essay—from explanatory to poetic modes, from academic to more creative and artistic forms of thinking about film and media,³ as a teaching tool and a form of academic outreach with the potential for public engagement⁴ as well as for social critique, protest, and activism.⁵ And, not surprisingly, there are disagreements about what constitutes legitimate scholarship. While Thomas van den Berg and Miklós Kiss, for instance, make the case for the “autonomous and explanatorily argumentative research video,” which they regard “as an audiovisual parallel to academic writing,”⁶ Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell point out that, “when working with moving images and sounds, the poetic force of the source materials cannot be ignored or avoided.”⁷ If the object and its analysis are no longer discursively separate, they argue, established approaches and rhetorical structures reach their limit. For Keathley and Mittell, “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.”⁸

Online platforms for the scholarly video essay such as the peer-review journal *[in]Transition*, which “is designed not only as a means to present selected videographic work, but to create a context for understanding it—and validating it—as a new mode of scholarly writing for the discipline of cinema and media studies and related fields,”⁹ remain non-prescriptive concerning form, content, register, or style. The journal features explanatory as well as poetic and deformative criticism, ensuring the scholarly value and knowledge effect of the contributions by publishing written statements from both the creators and peer reviewers alongside the video essay. This openness has encouraged experimentation in all kinds of directions and from all kinds of disciplines so that the field of videographic scholarship has been able to flourish and expand over the past years. But it would be naive to think that the scholarly video essay somehow existed and evolved in isolation from the rest of Web 2.0 and social media. The popularity and proliferating presence of polished, short, fast-paced,

casual video essays that tend to make auteur-centered observations and employ “hypernarration”¹⁰ in a “meek and self-conscious film-nerd tone, with rushed, mumbled delivery and an amusing use of inflection”¹¹ also affect and shape the form and content of the scholarly video essay. As a result, academics, too, must “navigate the uneasy terrain between the critical and the popular” that Allison de Fren describes.¹² While there is certainly nothing wrong with producing short and accessible videos that capture viewers and engage them on both cognitive and affective levels, I believe that the scholarly video essay should be more than a formal dissection or aesthetic appreciation of a director’s style. For me, the scholarly video essay should unfold academic arguments in dialogue with images and sound, and I think that academics, who produce video essays, need to reflect on the critical potential of the themes, concepts, and theories they explore, their use of academic language, and the politics of hearing women’s voices and accented voices, where male native English speakers continue to be the norm.

The scholarly video essay (and what we want it to be) is necessarily shaped by disciplinary backgrounds (and technical skill sets), by models from online film culture, and by traditional scholarship and what is valued as academic research (e.g. by peer-review journals or tenure committees). Videographic criticism will probably continue to depend on the written word (on voiceover narration, onscreen text, or accompanying statements) if it wants to meet traditional academic standards, but that doesn’t diminish its potential to expand the idea of what research and scholarship can look like in the digital age.¹³ If the scholarly video essay invites academics to engage with the medium-specific affordances of audiovisual forms, it also makes us rethink what we can achieve by writing about film and media, and how writing with images and sounds differs from using words only.

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1. Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, "Scholarship in Sound & Image: A Pedagogical Essay," in Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant, *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, 2019, <http://videographicessay.org>.
 2. Cf. Catherine Grant, "How Long Is a Piece of String? On the Practice, Scope and Value of Videographic Film Studies and Criticism," in *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, September 2014, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualalessay/frankfurt-papers/catherine-grant/>.
 3. Christian Keathley describes the explanatory and the poetic mode as the two ends of a continuum. Christian Keathley, "La caméra stylo: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia," in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, ed. Alex von Clayton and Andrew Klevan (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 176-190.
 4. See, for example, Erlend Lavik, "The Video Essay: The Future of Academic Film and Television Criticism?" *Frames* (2012). <http://framescinemajournal.com/article/the-video-essay-the-future/>.
 5. See, for example, Kevin B. Lee, "Critique, Protest, Activism, and the Video Essay," *NECSUS*, May 28, 2017, <https://necsus-ejms.org/critique-protest-activism-and-the-video-essay/>. In the wake of the worldwide protests following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in May 2020, Cydnie Wilde Harris, Kevin B. Lee, and Will DiGravio compiled a "Black Lives Matter Video Essay Playlist." They explain: "The need to stand for racial justice and against police brutality and systemic inequality is greater than ever. Video essays can play an important role in illuminating these issues, critically examining their representation in film and media, serving as a medium for Black visions and voices to be seen and heard in alliance with the expressions of all other people of color." See <https://thevideoessay.com/blacklivesmatter/>.
 6. Miklós Kiss and Thomas van den Berg, *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video* (Scalar, 2016), <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/index>.
 7. Keathley and Mittell, "Scholarship."
 8. Keathley and Mittell, "Scholarship."
 9. "About [in]Transition," [in]Transition: A MediaCommons Project with JCMS, accessed June 29, 2020, <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/about>.
 10. Kevin B. Lee, "What Makes a Video Essay Great?" (2014): <https://vimeo.com/199577445>.

11. Conor Bateman, “The Video Essay as Art: Finding Your Voiceover,” *Keyframe*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.fandor.com/keyframe/the-video-essay-as-art-finding-your-voiceover>.

12. Allison de Fren, “From the Essay Film to the Video Essay: Between the Critical and the Popular,” in *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, ed. Steve Anderson and Christie Milliken (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, forthcoming).

13. Cf. Ian Garwood’s project to create an alternative to the academic book, a “video monograph.” Ian Garwood, “From ‘video essay’ to ‘video monograph’?: Indy Vinyl as academic book,” *NECSUS*, June 15, 2020, <https://necsus-ejms.org/from-video-essay-to-video-monograph-indy-vinyl-as-academic-book/>. See also the project website: www.indy-vinyl.com.