

Editors' Introduction to Issue 15: The Scholarly Video Essay

Tracy Cox-Stanton and Allison de Fren

Once again, *The Cine-Files* considers the audiovisual essay, but this time focusing on the question, what constitutes videographic scholarship? While a great deal of valuable writing has been devoted to arguing (successfully, we believe) for the academic legitimation of the video essay, fewer sources have attempted to detail its scholarly attributes.

One of the few is *[in]Transition* (launched in 2014), the first peer-reviewed journal to focus exclusively on the video essay, where both video essayists and reviewers have, of necessity, had to consider what makes videographic work publishable. It is no coincidence, then, that several contributors to Issue 15 of *The Cine-Files* discuss the journal and cite its self-stated goal: “to create a context for understanding [videographic work]—and validating it—as a new mode of scholarly writing for the discipline of cinema and media studies and related fields.” Still, standards vary widely, as demonstrated by Ian Garwood’s essay in this issue, which culls and organizes the framing language used in 104 *[in]Transition* Creator Statements to provide a taxonomy (or supercut, if you like) of “how the people who make video essays about audiovisual texts and culture frame what they do in writing and justify it in scholarly terms.” Further, as noted by Christian Keathley in his written response to the “Once Upon a Screen” video collection in this issue, when it comes to determining what constitutes videographic scholarship, “even the co-editors don’t always agree.”

The goal of this issue was not to reach consensus, but rather to find starting points in what we hope will be an ongoing and vibrant conversation about videographic scholarship. That meant asking our contributors to lay down some stakes, a directive that admittedly inspired some resistance, as the video essay is often celebrated as a creative and open-ended alternative to the written scholarly essay, positioned by contrast as hackneyed and closed.

This is evident in the first publication to address directly the scholarly potentials of the video essay, Eric Faden’s 2008 “Manifesto for Critical Media.” Inspired by and fashioned after Alexandre Astruc’s 1948 proclamation of the “camera stylo,” Faden’s pronouncement of the “media stylo” is irreverent, hyperbolic, and exciting. Faden, like many who have followed, locates a precedent for the scholarly video essay in both the seventeenth century literary essay and the essay film, forms that locate the essayistic—from the French *essayeur*, “to attempt” or “to try”—in exploratory, digressive, reflexive, imaginative, and even fragmentary lines of thought. That such tendencies run counter to the linear and cohesive arguments associated with the traditional scholarly essay has made the video essay all the more attractive to many scholar-practitioners, who see in it not only a new mode of research and knowledge production, but also an opportunity for expanding and raising much-needed questions about what counts as scholarship within the academy.

The positioning of the video essay as a disruption of and creative alternative to traditional scholarship is echoed in a number of binary pairings meant to distinguish videographic from scholarly writing:

- Creative vs. Scholarly
- Poetic vs. Explanatory
- Subjective/Personal vs. Objective/Impartial
- Feelings/Affect vs. Ideas/Arguments
- Process vs. Outcome
- Practice vs. Theory

Our intention for Issue 15 was to complicate these distinctions and explore their areas of overlap in illuminating and fruitful ways, while also developing stronger descriptions of scholarly videographic methodologies. For, while we too embrace the creative potential of audiovisual writing and welcome its disruption to academic publishing, we also value the rigorous work of scholarship that comprises the heart of our profession. Moreover, we believe that there is something important at stake in submitting the audiovisual landscape to scholarly inquiry, now more than ever.

When we began this issue in 2019, we recognized that while questions about the scholarly might feel like a crimp on the creative possibilities of videographic work, they are increasingly necessary within a post-truth culture, in which research, data, evidence, and experts are often pitted against public opinion, emotional appeals, and media spectacle. These questions have only become more pressing. As Issue 15 of *The Cine-Files* unfolded, we witnessed the continued police murders of unarmed Black people, fascist power-grabs in the U.S. including attempts to use the military to quash protests, and over a million dead from a global pandemic. These traumas have been exacerbated by the proliferation of media “filter bubbles” and conspiracy theories, often fueled by affect-laden and illogical audiovisual arguments.

Interrogating the work that we film/media scholars do and why we do it is newly urgent, even as such an inquiry touches upon questions that have always been at the heart of our profession:

- Why does media scholarship matter and how does it engage the world outside of academia?
- What does it mean to be a professor and assert or relinquish one’s authority?
- What is the relationship between aesthetics (how does cinema feel?) and politics/ideology (what does cinema mean?)?
- How do particular narrative modes give meaning to the past?
- How do thinking and communicating in images and sounds differ from thinking and communicating in writing?

Centering their thoughts on the particularities of audiovisual writing, the contributors to this issue grapple with these questions. We believe that their work, collectively, provides a helpful foundation—for practitioners, teachers, enthusiasts and even skeptics—for understanding what makes the video essay scholarly.

Tracy Cox-Stanton is Professor of Cinema Studies at Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia. She is the founder and editor of *The Cine-Files*. Her videographic work has been published in *[in]Transition* and *NECSUS Journal of European Media Studies*, and screened at Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival in Scotland.

Allison de Fren is Associate Professor and Chair of the Media Arts & Culture department at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Her research-practice focuses on gender and technology and, increasingly, videographic criticism and pedagogy. Her documentaries and video essays have screened internationally and her videographic criticism published in a variety of online journals.