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# From 'video essay' to 'video monograph'? Indy Vinyl as academic book

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# From 'video essay' to 'video monograph'?: *Indy Vinyl* as academic book

## Ian Garwood

**Abstract**

Sarah Barrow argues that the video essay provides a 'viable alternative to the academic book'.[1] This article explores that claim, considering how a video essay-based project can pursue a single topic in the manner of a monograph. The case study is *Indy Vinyl*, my collection of video essays and writing about vinyl records in American Independent Cinema. I argue that an approach informed by traditional scholarly values should be augmented by more exploratory thinking, when moving from written to practice-based forms of film criticism.

**Keywords:** American Independent Cinema, audiovisual essay, digital humanities, film studies, monograph, video essay, videographic criticism, vinyl

## Introduction

*Indy Vinyl* is a single-authored academic research project on vinyl records in American Independent Cinema, between 1987 and 2018. Beginning with the 2016 publication of a book chapter on records in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Ghost World* and an accompanying video compilation, the project also encompasses, at the time of writing: three more video compilations; two 'critical montages'; a thirteen-minute scene analysis; an ongoing series of social media posts. The book chapter, videos, and selected social media posts are curated at www.indy-vinyl.com. The project invites the reader/viewer to engage with a range of materials as research, from a 'traditional' 8,000-word peer-reviewed academic book chapter to a nine-second video.

This article is an integral feature of the project. It reflects on the research value of the components and their intellectual coherence. The audiovisual aspects of my research are examples of videographic film criticism, a practice that uses 'digital technologies [to enable] film and media scholars to write using the very materials that constitute their objects of study: moving images and sounds'.[2] To my knowledge, within academic film studies, this is the most sizeable attempt to produce 'long-form' film analysis on a single theme through a combination of writing and video.[3] As such, it explores the potential noted by Sarah Barrow for the video essay to operate as a 'viable alternative to the academic book'.[4] This article considers the merit and limitations of using the academic book, a format associated with a particular set of scholarly values, as a reference point for long-form acts of videographic film criticism.

Within the arts and humanities, the monograph is the type of 'academic book' that has most commonly housed single-authored, long-form research on a specific topic. I came into this project with what I term a 'monographic mindset'. Approaching it this way helped to keep in focus the scholarly purpose of using formats that had been developed in a popular online cinephilic environment.[5] This had been fermented from the mid-2000s by the availability of films in digital form, the development of user-friendly editing software, and the ability to share the resultant videos on streaming services like YouTube. Situated within this environment, my research was underpinned by two questions – a fairly conventional one about a filmic object of study, and a reflexive one about the form the enquiry would take: (1) how has the recurring depiction of vinyl contributed to American Independent Cinema's identity as a distinctive film movement?; (2) what are the possibilities and limitations as academic film research adopts audiovisual forms borne from online film culture?

In the drive to legitimise practice-as-research academic outputs, a common argument has been that the generative and processual nature of practice means it is not appropriate to 'front-load' such projects with rigidly directive research questions. Desmond Bell, for example, notes how practice-as-research advocates have distinguished 'between the propositional forms of knowledge and writerly practices characteristic of traditional scholarship, and the tacit and embodied forms of visually-led knowledge found in art practice'.[6] In its pairing of the more directive question which characterises traditional scholarship with a reflection on the possibilities and limitations of critical form, I aimed to investigate the tension Bell refers to.

*Indy Vinyl* exists at the interface of three different film criticism discourses: a discourse of the academic monograph, rooted in the written word; the playful discourse of online audiovisual cinephilia; and a practice-as-research discourse that valorises the work's embodied qualities. This article reflects upon my efforts to operate within these three discourses (research question 2), whilst offering new knowledge about American Independent Cinema (research question 1). It is structured to mirror the shift in critical approach that took place as the project developed: from the planning phase, informed by a fairly rigid monographic mindset, to progressively more exploratory thinking, facilitated by an engagement with different audiovisual forms (the explanatory video essay, the supercut, social media posts). As I review my use of these forms, I consider the potential in their medium-specific affordances, but I also question the extent to which the resulting work can be thought of as fully-formed academic research.

In so doing, I enter into a debate about the value of digital scholarship, following Anna Friedberg in considering it as both a 'translation'[7] of academic writing (whether literally or in terms of its underpinning values) and as critical thinking that is 'born digital'.[8] Published in 2009, Friedberg's article pre-dates the wave of reflexive writing about the possibilities of videographic film criticism in particular.[9] The most specific contribution of this article is to that body of work, as I consider videographic criticism's potential in expanding the idea of what constitutes film studies scholarship.

## Beginnings: The monographic mindset in practice

Sarah Barrow's advocacy for the academic video essay appears in a book chapter for 'The Academic Book of the Future' research project. The end-of-project reports offer these definitions of the monograph:

> [T]he result of in-depth academic research, often over a period of many years, making an original contribution to a field of study, and typically of 80-100,000 words in length … Monographs are fundamental means to share the fruits of research in the humanities …
> (Marilyn Deegan)[10]

> [the monograph provides] a detailed examination of a specific topic, with a carefully constructed presentation of evidence and contextual analysis, along with a scholarly apparatus of references and citations, bibliographies and so on.
> (Michael Jubb)[11]

Certain aspects of both definitions fit *Indy Vinyl*. It is the result of in-depth, years-long academic research. It offers an original contribution to the field of study (of American Independent Cinema and videographic film criticism) and provides a detailed examination of a specific topic.

Other elements from each definition fit less easily. The most contentious aspects are that a monograph should be 'carefully constructed' in its presentation of evidence and contextual analysis and should share the 'fruits of research'. To recall Bell, is it possible to meet these standards in work whose knowledge effects may be tacit and embodied (rather than written) and that is often process-driven (demonstrating the 'seeds' of research, rather than its fruits)? Furthermore, *Indy Vinyl*'s digital format gives it the rhizomatic quality described by Friedberg, allowing multiple points of entry that mitigate against the building of a clearly charted complex argument.[12]

Monographic thinking influenced early conceptualisations of the project, leading to an initial book-like plan. I conceived of the video essays functioning according to a monographic structure: a five-minute video that sets out the topic and key research questions; supercuts that act as an introduction to the relevant films; and main 'chapters' which each map on to bigger debates about American Independent Cinema. The project was to be 'book-ended' by two 8,000 word peer-reviewed articles: a chapter that provides context about contemporary American Independent Cinema and vinyl culture; and a reflective article on the project. This listing represents the 'contents page', as originally planned. The elements in bold italics are the ones that remain, in the project's current form:

'***Vinyl Noise and Narrative in CD-Era Indiewood*** *(book chapter)*
Indy Vinyl: Introduction (video)
***Indy Vinyl Supercuts (videos)***

Main Chapters (all videos)
Genre: Vinyl Vampires: Records and Horror in American Independent Cinema
Authorship: Todd Haynes: Vinyl Auteur
Quirky Aesthetics: The Overhead Vinyl Shot in American Independent Cinema
***Realist Aesthetics: The L/Song Take in Before Sunrise***
Gender: Indy Vinyl, Reframed

## *Indy Vinyl*: Project Reflection (journal article)

Thinking monographically, four of the main chapters plus an introduction are currently missing, a level of deviation that would not be expected in the course of writing an academic book. Other research elements have taken their place, the most direct substitutions involving the production of different video essays, 'Indy Vinyl on *The Clock* (and the clock)' and 'Indy Vinyl, Interrupted'. While I will make the case for their value, they do not adopt the explanatory, clearly topic-based approach of the original plan. The other elements filling out the project involve 'research fragments' disseminated via social media, which are even more difficult to accommodate within a monographically-conceived container. The remainder of this article reviews the different forms my research has ended up adopting, discussing the relationship between my pursuit of a traditionally directive research question (to do with the analysis of vinyl records in film) and my exploration of critical form (including the adoption of formats conceived outside of an academic context).

## Formal exploration within the explanatory video essay: 'The L/Song Take in *Before Sunrise*'

From the original project plan, the only main 'chapter' to survive is the *Before Sunrise* video. This is also the video essay to adhere most closely to principles of argumentation associated with academic writing, including that of the monograph. It works within an 'explanatory mode', a productively divisive term in debates about how audiovisual film criticism should be pursued within the academy. In a key online resource for videographic film studies, Jason Mittell and Christian Keathley state a preference for work that reaches beyond the explanatory:

> Many videographic works adopt the rhetorical mode most typical for scholars, offering an illustrated lecture or written essay being narrated, an approach that we term the 'explanatory mode'.[iii] However, 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.[13]

The 'poetic' approach has been influential in determining the qualities of videographic film criticism curated on academic platforms, including *[in]Transition*, 'the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic film and

moving image studies'.[14] In fact, the call for more poetically imaginative work has been heeded to the extent that, within a specifically academic context, the claim that 'many videographic works' adopt a lecture/written rhetorical mode no longer rings true.

The preference for the poetic over the explanatory is identified as a problem by Miklos Kiss and Thomas van den Berg. They argue for 'the traits and rhetoric of a traditionally text-based scholarly work'[15] to be incorporated into videographic scholarship, recognising the value of the 'autonomous and explanatorily argumentative research video':[16]

> this type of audiovisual work will introduce a thesis, place this within a broader context, develop a theoretical notion and argument with an array of both aural as well as visual means, employing a full-bodied and standalone (video) 'text' to represent the analytical findings taken from a (film) 'text'.[17]

The *Before Sunrise* video was curated as part of a collection of scene analyses in NECSUS edited by Kiss, according to a brief in line with this position. My video essay strives to fulfil the conditions of the self-contained argumentative research video. In its first three-and-a-half minutes it introduces its thesis: that the long-take record playing scene in *Before Sunrise* stands apart from the many other long-take sequences in the film, in ways the video will explain. To provide a context for this investigation, I introduce the existing critical discussion of the scene. From that point on, the video uses an array of visual and aural means to represent its findings, broadening the scope of the argument to contextualise the scene within the contemporaneous depiction of record-playing moments in American Independent Cinema.

With its clear argumentative structure, attention to textual detail, and acts of critical contextualisation, '*Before Sunrise*' is the video essay most easily connected to the traditionally academic written chapter that forms part of the *Indy Vinyl* project: 'Vinyl Noise and Narrative in CD-Era Indiewood'. The video stands alongside this written analysis as an example of what characters' affiliation to vinyl could mean in American Independent films made at a time when record playing had become a niche choice, having lost the format war to the CD. By producing a videographic work that could be 'slotted into' the written chapter, my approach accords with that of Kiss and van den Berg:

> Video essayist scholars should be looking at how can one improve argumentative fluidity with the current carrier in order to attain a level of information that was the bar prior to, and regardless of this technological shift?[18]

However, the element intended to give the video its audiovisual potency, is one that is not translatable to the written word and, indeed, caused problems in conducting the analysis in the streamlined, explicatory manner called for in Kiss's brief. The song played in the record store in *Before Sunrise* is Kath Bloom's 'Come Here', and this soundtracks the argument I make about the scene. The idea was for the viewer/listener to experience the repetition of the song as a kind of productive, and immersive, replay: the pop song is a particularly repeatable cultural form, and I wanted the viewer/listener to feel both the pleasure of returning to something familiar (the same song and the same scene under analysis) as well as the possibility of experiencing something new (noticing something else in the music and a different 'angle' in the scene analysis). The repetition of the song was also meant to build an expectation that I could then play with towards the video's conclusion.

It is key to my argument about the scene's distinctiveness that the film's two protagonists are understood to 'follow the music', whereas in the other long-take sequences sound and image are led by the characters' verbal and visual roaming. My video also follows the music, and this gives it an audiovisual quality that is not transferable to traditional written scholarship. It performs criticism within the space of a song,[19] a concept that makes sense performatively (it makes use of the multimodal qualities of the audiovisual format) and thematically (it parallels the aesthetic organisation of the scene I am analysing). However, it also runs the risk of conflating the critical activity with the aesthetic object being studied, something Kiss and van den Berg explicitly warn against: 'rather than having a framed perspective on a case study, it is currently the other way around: *the case (study) dictates what is being presented*.'[20]

In my first draft of the video, the decision to structure the analysis around the repetition of the song hampered my ability to construct a well-rounded argument. This clip features the ending of the first draft of the video, as it was sent to NECSUS for peer review. This version makes use of the song as it is heard in the film (it fades out around a minute before its end). Whereas, in its previous iterations in my video, the beginning of each replay of the song is synced with its originating moment in *Before Sunrise*, the original ending of my video essay features a quite inelegant looping back to the start of the instrumental break, which is not synced with the images it originally accompanied (00:48 in the clip). This was an attempt to buy more time to complete my argument but, even with this audio patched in, the ending feels abrupt, something the reviewer also noted. Reworking this required some audio

sleight-of-hand. In the published version, at 09:19, the analysis returns to the end of the record-booth long take, featuring the song synced as in the original film. However, the song being used in my video is the full rendition, rather than the faded-out version heard in *Before Sunrise*. This means that the original sound mix of the montage scene that follows the record-booth long take is lost. However, it also allows for the song to play uninterrupted to its conclusion, manufacturing more time to clarify and conclude my argument. Furthermore, by allowing the track to 'play out', the subsequent song in the video, cued to the needle-drop moment within the film, feels like the next track on an album, signalling the progression of analysis from *Before Sunrise* to its sequel, *Before Sunset*.

Here, the course of my argument was shaped by the relatively intransigent nature of the song, with the added complication that the music was part of my object of study. In my writing on pop music in narrative film, I have considered the supposedly inflexible structure of the pop song as a factor in its operation as dramatic film music[21] Here, I applied this critical thinking to my own practice when using pop songs to soundtrack my audiovisual criticism. Additionally, in the second-by-second responsiveness of the visuals to the music, I wanted to 'rhythmise perception' through musical-visual choreography, as Catherine Grant claims for her video essay 'Carnal Locomotive', which uses a track by Christian Bjorklund to accompany a scene from Rene Clement's *Le Jour et L'heure*:

> *Carnal Locomotive* urges its viewers and their bodies to enter more fully (corporeally, *carnally*) into a rhythmic engagement with what they see and hear, in order to feel more *on track*, *in a groove*, as part of a greater sympathetic engagement with the visual matter of Clément's film sequence.[22]

Grant associates the 'rhythmising attitude' of her video with 'more poetic, less obviously 'explanatory''[23] videographic criticism. My video seeks to demonstrate that a 'song take' on audiovisual film criticism can sustain poetic and explanatory attitudes simultaneously.

## The scholarly value of the supercut: 'Simple' compilations and 'critical' montages

The *Indy Vinyl* project features six video essays that could be classified as supercuts, a format intrinsically associated with online cinephilic culture. In

2008, in response to the proliferation of online video compilations, Andy Baio coined the term 'supercut' to describe 'obsessive-compulsive montages of video clips, meticulously isolating every instance of a single item, usually clichés, phrases, and other tropes'.[24]

The supercut is most often described as an 'uncritical' format, which makes it a problematic container if judged with a monographic mindset. This statement from the academic filmmaker Eric Faden is axiomatic:

> people in academic film studies started to rightly wonder about how my video essay work was different from, say, a 'supercut'? At what point does a work start to take on a critical, scholarly function?[25]

In making the case for the scholarly value of my supercuts, I will distinguish between the four 'simple compilations' (Supercuts 1 to 4) and two 'critical montages' ('Indy Vinyl on *The Clock* (and the clock)' and 'Indy Vinyl, Interrupted'). Thinking monographically, the supercut can be equated to the early part of a book, in which the range of films under scrutiny is disclosed. Apart from defining a corpus, the act of listing can offer evidence that an exhaustive research process has taken place to identify relevant works. Already described as an 'unprecedented feat of scholarship'[26] in its original incarnation (Supercut 1), the later supercuts (3 and 4) add a considerable number of examples to the collection, with the result that Supercut 4 'boasts' it covers 148 films within three minutes.

The rhetoric of these compilations (and the decision to show the corpus growing over time in the different versions) is self-consciously completist. 'Completism' is a quality associated with the mindset of three spheres of activity relevant to the *Indy Vinyl* project: the compulsive gathering of material typical of supercuts; the emergence of the record collecting completist as an American independent movie 'type'; and the expectations of completism in certain types of academic research. Discussing her supercut of dissolves in *Brief Encounter*, Catherine Grant describes completism as a 'film studies *dispositif*' that frames the "care and concernful dealings" of my approach to handling the audiovisual material'.[27]

While the completism of the supercut can be claimed as a scholarly quality, Tiago Baptista argues that it is misleading to assume that its 'sheer accumulation is already a form of analysis'.[28] At this stage, the only claim I advance about the scholarly value of my supercuts is that they provide compel-

ling evidence of a thorough research process that has uncovered a phenomenon worthy of academic investigation. In this sense, I agree with Allison de Fren's understanding of the supercut's role within academic research:

> While I think that the deformative, aggregative, and algorithmic experiments engaged in the supercut are wonderful ways for generating critical observations and insights, I find it important to use those observations toward a larger analysis. For me, this is where most of the work comes in.[29]

The supercuts provide the basis for the larger analysis that occurs in the book chapter that forms part of *Indy Vinyl* (this chapter features a link to Supercut 2 in its footnotes) and they provide a context for the singular analysis of the *Before Sunrise* video. They also provide the basis for the more wide-ranging commentary of the two critical montages. In all these cases, the supercuts are integral to the exploration of my first research question, providing a survey-based understanding of movie record-playing moments to support the more specific investigations that take place in other components of *Indy Vinyl*.

That said, this function would have been served through the production of one simple compilation. My decision to produce four versions of the supercut was made in pursuit of my second research question, to consider the value of popular online audiovisual forms for academic film criticism. By presenting similar visual material in different ways, with different soundtracks, I set up a comparison that can activate thinking in the viewer about the varying knowledge effects these audiovisual combinations can yield.

Supercuts 2 to 4 all revolve around the conceit of fitting my thirty-year-long film corpus into a three-minute pop-song length container. The 'race-against-time' narrative reflects self-consciously on the frenetically compressed quality of viral supercuts, which offer whistle-stop tours around their obsessively curated archives. The difference between Supercuts 2 and 3 is mainly in the choice of soundtrack. Both versions speed up the footage progressively in order to 'beat' the three-minute time limit, but Supercut 2 is soundtracked by three songs taken from films in the compilation, whereas Supercut 3 features a gradually-accelerating original 'indie' score. Supercut 4 also features the original score, but this time an ever more ornate multi-screen aesthetic delivers the clips. Supercut 1 forms the basis for the visual arrangement of Supercuts 2 and 3, but plays the clips out in 'real time', with only one excursion into multi-screen composition. It also – with a significant exception – matches the original sound of the clips to their visual source.

As one example of what a comparison between the supercuts may yield, I will juxtapose the audiovisual handling of a similar passage in two of the videos, at a point where the compilation reaches a group of high-profile films (*High Fidelity*, *Almost Famous*, *Ghost World*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums*), in which the figure of the record collector/vinyl fan is prominent. In the relevant section in Supercut 4, the multi-screen aesthetic is trained on each film by turn (see 1:35 to 1:48 and the example of *High Fidelity* in Fig. 2). This is distinctive in two ways. It interrupts the video's general movement towards presenting more films within the same frame. Fig. 1 demonstrates the dominant aesthetic at its most intense, with 22 movies represented onscreen simultaneously.



Fig. 1: Multiple movies in a multi-screen composition in Supercut 4.

Second, the treatment of each of these four films looks beyond the close shots of vinyl that generally feature in the supercut, to show the characters interacting with records (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Singling out character/vinyl interactions in *High Fidelity* in Supercut 4.

By representing an increasing attachment between onscreen bodies and their vinyl objects of affection, this passage demonstrates the importance of these films in cementing the vinylphile as a particular 'indie' type.

At a similar point, Supercut 1 uses a change in soundtrack, rather than image, to focus attention on these films. In this instance, sound counter-balances the familiar association of vinylphilia with the 'fanboy' in both *High Fidelity* and *Almost Famous*. Up until this point, sound has been synced with the clips/movies from which it originally came. This changes when the video reaches *The Virgin Suicides* (see 02:23). The soundtrack is then provided by the song montage that accompanies the film's record-playing scene, in which a group of boys and girls communicate by playing records down the telephone to each other. Exceptionally, this song montage is allowed to continue as the supercut moves on to *High Fidelity* and *Almost Famous*. Thus, the soundtrack of two high-profile male-centred movies is usurped by the music from a film directed by a woman (Sofia Coppola), centring a group of teenage girls (including their experience of listening to and playing records). Furthermore, it results, at 03:30, in a synaesthetic blend of trailing female voice – Carole King singing 'So Far Away' from *The Virgin Suicides* – and a downward glide towards a record needle, from *Almost Famous*. This (literally) adds a female voice to a scene originally presented as a male rite of passage (soundtracked by The Who instrumental 'Sparks').

In these two treatments of similar source material, different 'readings' of the films are encouraged through audiovisual choreography. This analysis is offered as an example of the kind of comparative thinking the multiple compilations make possible, the exploration of different formal arrangements producing knowledge effects that belie an understanding of the supercut as a mere cataloguing of instances. The two other compilations, which I have termed 'critical montages', are subject to more consistently conscious authorial intervention, to produce knowledge effects pertinent to both my key research questions. 'Indy Vinyl on *The Clock* (and the clock)' is composed of four sections, each with a different sense of time: (1) 'real life' time, beginning as a video blog, chronicling the release of Supercut 3, a visit to a screening of Christian Marclay's 24-hour supercut of clocks in film, and the release of *Sight and Sound* magazine's 2018 video essay poll; (2) 'false' linear screen time, as it then mimics the style of *The Clock*, editing together clips to give the illusion of a seamless movement from turning on the stereo to putting the needle on a record; (3) simultaneous time, as it moves to a multi-screen aesthetic,

featuring 36 needle-drop moments; (4) and 'real' linear film time, as it reorganises into a three-screen arrangement with the scenes continuing beyond the needle-drop, each sequence being 'sampled' at some point to be seen and heard in its own screen, and each dropping out of view once the music associated with the needle-drop stops. The sequences are ordered from shortest to longest and an editing timeline at the bottom of the screen runs in synchronicity with the clips. This video essay encourages a self-consciousness in the viewer of how video essays can manipulate the 'original' sense of time in the archive of moving images and sounds they use. This is a significant question, in the context of a project that features a thirteen-minute analysis of a two-minute scene and a compilation that compresses 148 films into three minutes.

The video is equally interested in exploring the project's first research question, to do with vinyl's role in establishing an identity for American Independent Cinema. It works 'anti-climactically', peaking early with an epiphanic multi-screen depiction of the needle-drop moment and then letting the scenes play out. The result is an invitation to explore what happens after the 'high point' of the needle-drop, bringing back some of the narrative context that is lost in the simple compilations, which reduce attention, as supercuts tend to do, to the most visually striking compositions.

'Interrupted' mirrors 'on *The Clock*'s' referencing of another supercut to reflect upon its own form. The video is prefaced by two quotations, both of which address digital forms of film criticism: Tom McCormack laments the 'limited potential' of the supercut for social critique;[30] whilst Anna Cooper notes that the 'digital' can either reinforce or challenge gendered hegemonic power.[31] The video that follows explores how the supercut can work as effective social critique, in relation to gendered hegemonic power. It does this, partly, by disrupting the pleasure provided by Supercut 4. Every time the video reaches a film made by personnel with allegations of sexual misconduct or assault, the supercut gets 'stuck'. At these points, quotations questioning the film canon appear on the screen, while the soundtrack is filled with the voice of Jennifer Proctor, an academic filmmaker, talking about her critical supercut '<u>Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix</u>'. Through the disruption of the original supercut, viewers are encouraged to 'snap out' of their immersion in vinylphilia, to understand the *Indy Vinyl* corpus, instead, as a sample of American Independent Cinema, a filmmaking institution whose reputation for 'risk taking' and 'maverick' auteurs must now be revisited in the light of #MeToo. Here, then, the investigation of the supercut as a digital

form goes hand-in-hand with the exploration of the identity of American Independent Cinema. The video takes the original compilation as the basis for the 'larger analysis'[32] that de Fren calls for, while still being rooted in an investigation of its own form.

In one of the quotations featured towards the end of 'Interrupted', Anna Cooper suggests a way to move beyond the existing film canon, which is based on, and normalises, different social inequalities:

> 'Distant reading' methods, which look across an entire body of texts for large-scale patterns rather than the more typical method of reading a small number of texts closely, would be a place to start; such a method would, at the least, yield further information about all that has been erased in the processes of canonization and possibly provide useful data that would help us to reconceptualize film canon.[33]

Distant reading is a methodology associated with digital humanities, in which technology is used to analyse large bodies of artistic data, to discern patterns that would not be evident through the close readings of individual texts, and 'democratise' the process by which texts are selected for analysis. As Jason Mittell notes, videographic film criticism is not usually thought of as digital humanities, perhaps because it seems too small-scale, qualitative, and 'home-made'. Nevertheless, as Mittell states, videographic criticism is founded on a computational method, like digital humanities, in the core practice of importing a 'read-only' video into a digital editing platform. This turns the original video into 'an archive of sounds and moving images … that enables us to break the seal that binds a film as a finished work and then engage with its component parts'.[34] Seen this way, the supercut is a videographic form that most resembles the quantitative approach to large scale datasets associated with digital humanities. Understanding the supercut as a type of distant reading is a useful way to frame it as a more potent form of criticism than it is usually taken to be.

## Social media 'sleevenotes' as scholarship

The production of the supercuts for *Indy Vinyl* has spanned a period in which the format has seen a decline in its status as a viral form. In 2018, Brian Raferty described the 'fall' of the supercut, suggesting that it is now considered too 'longform' to compete with the visual snippets that circulate on social

media.[35] As part of *Indy Vinyl* I wanted to explore the possibilities of producing 'snippets' of criticism designed for social media. I have produced content on Twitter about many of the films in my corpus, including screengrabs, GIFs, and short straight-to-Twitter video essays, accompanied by pithy critical statements/questions. Of all the audiovisual criticism produced for the project, these posts seem the least connected to notions of scholarship bound by a monographic mindset. I want to discuss the academic value of these posts, as well as their relationship to the research questions governing the project as a whole.

The shortest 'video essay' I have produced is this nine-second sound GIF featuring Keanu Reeves saying, 'I love the sound of vinyl'. This was presented as a Tweet with the accompanying text:



Fig. 3: *Knock Knock* sound GIF Tweet.

While this appears slight as a 'research output', the GIF adopts the same critical approach as the first video essay to be curated for *[in]Transition*, which was chosen explicitly to make a case for how such work can be viewed as

'scholarship'.[36] Like my GIF, Laura Mulvey's re-edit of Marilyn Monroe dancing in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* hones in on a small moment of performance, replaying it to come to terms with a gesture that had caught Mulvey's attention. In my case, I was captivated by the gravitas of Reeves' delivery, which becomes even more pronounced as it is artificially isolated, given 'undue' attention (including spelling the words out in text) and acquires a musical quality through its repetition. This suggests, through sensory manipulation, that vinyl is fetishised in American Independent Cinema not only through direct visual and musical representation, but also through the delivery of dialogue.

In a later article reflecting on the videographic analysis of star performances, Catherine Grant acknowledges that the understanding of Mulvey's video as an example of 'star studies' (i.e. as contributing to an academic field) 'is entirely dependent on the context in which one encounters the work, given that it is unencumbered (as a stand-alone artifact, at least) by a conventional explanatory framework'.[37] While the rationale I have presented to position the GIF in a scholarly context may be a start, more would need to be done to support claims for it as a fully-developed piece of scholarship. If videographic criticism produced by academics has often borne the traces of popular online forms, this example does so to an extreme, even though I still make a claim for it as a 'research fragment'.

Other posts are more self-sufficient in presenting themselves as acts of scholarship, making use of the affordances of Twitter to do so. For example, a thread on the vampire movie *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* uses this GIF to support a point about the film's association of vinyl with the addiction of a non-vampiric character (Fig. 4); a screengrab to demonstrate the ironically more 'human' connotations of vinyl in relation to the vampire protagonist (Fig. 5); and continues to point to contextual material that helped inform my reading (Figs 6 and 7).

Fig. 4: *A Girl Walks Home* Alone *at Night*, Tweet 1.



Fig. 5: *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, Tweet 2.

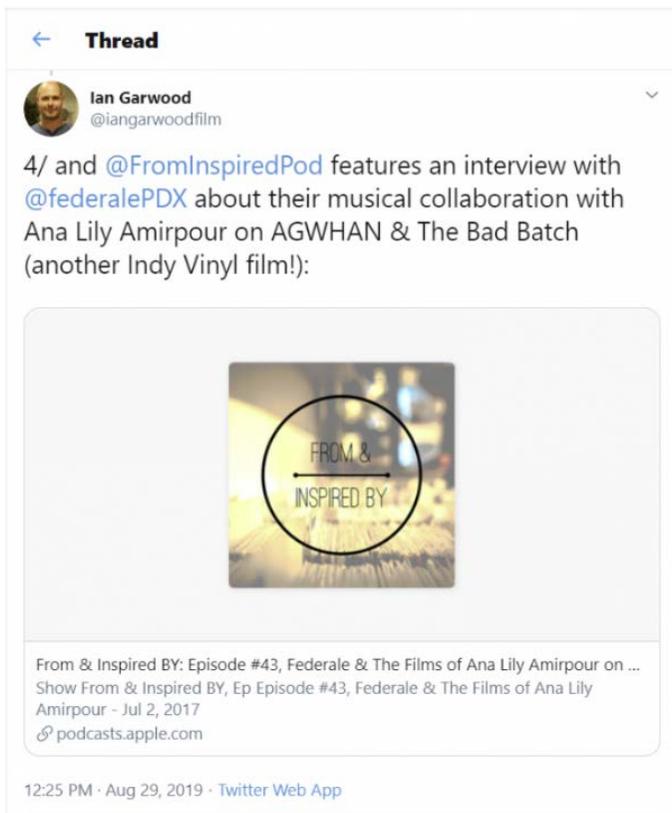Fig. 6: *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, Tweet 3.



Fig. 7: *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, Tweet 4.

Other straight-to-Twitter video essays are also offered as self-sufficient research. For example, 'Women, Violence and the Jukebox in *Death Proof*' expands on a claim I made in this Tweet about the association of female vinylphilia with punishment in Quentin Tarantino's movie:

Fig. 8: *Death Proof* Tweet.

The video essay takes its soundtrack from Kevin B. Lee's supercut 'The Tarantino Death Toll', which compiles, and keeps a tally of, every death scene in Tarantino's movies. I also take the opening titles from Kevin B. Lee's video essay and adjust them slightly, to turn the focus from the visual to the aural. I then use the soundtrack from the *Death Proof* segment of Lee's video, which features the violent demise of all the female characters, playing it over re-edited footage of the same characters in the bar from earlier in the movie. They are now soundtracked by the sounds of their deaths, rather than the music from the bar's jukebox as had originally been the case.

This video creates new knowledge effects about the film. It performs, audiovisually, the critique in my written post, but also suggests new connections between the female characters' use of the jukebox and their punishment, through a re-editing process that synchronises the women's physical and mu-

sical movements to specific sounds that accompany their deaths. It also contextualises the reading within the existing critical discourse on the film, through its reappropriation of Kevin B. Lee's video.

At various points, I have suggested how other audiovisual elements in *Indy Vinyl* fit within a monographic scheme: the supercuts can be seen as an introduction to the corpus; the *Before Sunrise* video can be understood as a 'chapter'. However, this kind of translation does not seem appropriate for some of the social media content. Curating this material as 'sleevenotes' is intended to give the impression that these are research 'jottings'. The attraction of producing these social media posts is that it allows me to consider more topics than can be incorporated in the 'major' research outputs and, as Michael Z. Newman claims of the GIF, to engage with 'a wider culture of media appropriation and appreciation'.[38]

## Conclusion

The neatness of the original chapter structure for *Indy Vinyl* has been disturbed by the scattering of research fragments represented by the social media posts. Some of these are given 'order' by their curation on the website, but others are retrievable only by visiting my Twitter timeline. There you will find evidence of interaction with other users, suggesting a co-production of a 'knowledge effect', but also instances where the post has gone unnoticed, lost in the incessant social media stream. In either case, this takes the project away from notions of the monographic, which Phil Pochoda associates with an analogue academic system:

> The analogue scholarly publishing system – engaged in the production of books that are *bounded* (literally, bound), *identifiable* (clearly and immutably authored and titled), and *stable* (the container and the content of each book remained fixed) – is itself *stable*, *bounded*, *continuous*, *well ordered*, and *well policed*.[39]

The website is my best attempt to 'bind', 'stabilise', and 'order' this research, but this involves linking to other places (the videos are hosted on Vimeo) or reconstructing social media posts. On the home page, I give guidance on the order in which viewers/readers might want to work through the material. However, I do so fully aware that this suggestion of linearity is being made in a non-linear medium. Furthermore, I appreciate that this sequencing does not present a uniquely 'ideal' pathway through the research. For example, the

social media posts, even in their curated form, may be better experienced as interludes, rather than sampled together. I claimed earlier that the nine-second sound gif of Keanu Reeves represents the shortest 'video essay' in the project. Viewed in its original context, running on an infinite loop in my Twitter feed, the opposite is true. The fact that I claim it as both the shortest and longest video in the *Indy Vinyl* collection suggests the resistance of the material to ordering and policing through a monographic approach.

However, I argue that the project is successful in observing one fundamental principle associated with the monograph: the audiovisual and written work consistently addresses the key research questions, combining to create a long-form piece of criticism. The balance between vinyl representation in American Independent Cinema and reflection on forms of audiovisual criticism differs depending on the piece. Videos with a high investment in the exploration of audiovisual form, such as the simple compilations collected in the Supercuts section, are less obviously committed to producing 'arguments' about record playing in the films; videos taking a clear explanatory approach (most strongly, 'The L/Song Take in *Before Sunrise*') are weighted more towards producing knowledge about vinyl representation in cinema. However, one function of this article is to articulate how both questions are addressed simultaneously, even at each 'extreme' of the continuum.

Another connection between the videos is the ways they make visible the processes that drive them. They settle upon a procedure, based on particular parameters, and then let the process play out. In each video there is also evidence of editorial intervention on my part, in which I perform a critical act in order to form an interpretation of the audiovisual material. This differs from the approach of the monograph, in which the finished product is conceived as the 'fruits of the research'. My videographic practice shares a tendency with much audiovisual film criticism to present process and analysis simultaneously and this is one reason it may be difficult to assess according to academic criteria associated with the written word. It also means that the viewer is more of a participant in making meaning than the reader of written scholarship, which is typically presented as a transmission from author to reader. No matter the level of control I have asserted in the conception and production of my video essays, there is always an excess of meaning: an effect of the process playing out that a viewer may latch onto in a way I could not anticipate; a detail in the audiovisual material that a viewer identifies as significant, in a manner I had not considered.

The quest is ongoing to find an appropriate language to legitimise video-graphic film criticism within the writing-based scholarly discourse that dominates thinking within the arts and humanities. *[In]Transition* operates an open peer-review system precisely to facilitate the discussion of how the work it curates can 'function as scholarship',[40] and this article is a contribution to that endeavour. *Indy Vinyl* takes an analogue object – the vinyl record – and subjects its film representation to a digital enquiry. Relatedly, my analogue academic thinking has been tested and reformed through digital investigation, revising an understanding of the shape the 'final products' of scholarship can take.

## Author

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# Notes

[1]     Barrow 2016, p. 27.

[2]     http://mediacommons.org/intransition/about (accessed on 28 February 2020)

[3]     This is contestable. The thematically linked video essay series is a format used by very popular video essayists (e.g. Lindsay Ellis ran the nine-part series, 'The Whole Plate: Film Studies through a Lens of Transformers'). However, these are not presented as academic research projects. Other academics have produced video essay series based on a single topic (e.g. Catherine Grant's essays on the figuration of deer in films and Kevin B Lee and Chloé Galibert Laîné's *Bottled Songs* project), but the creators do not describe their work in long-form terms. Jason Mittell is currently completing an 'audiovisual book' on *Breaking Bad* which he ventures to call the first of its kind in terms of the study of television series. One of my PhD supervisees, Daniel Massie, has produced a thesis he claims as the first to feature videographic film criticism. In the same spirit, I believe my project is the first audiovisual book in the field of text-based academic film studies.

[4]     Barrow 2016, p. 27.

[5]     The mindset was also influenced by my institutional position as a research-active lecturer in a film and television studies unit. In the UK context, this meant I was expected to produce a monograph – or something comparable – for submission to UK's Research Excellence Framework assessment exercise. As my project has developed, some of the institutional discussion has been about its monographic qualities: does it constitute something as 'weighty' as a single-authored academic book?

[6]     Bell 2006, p. 95.

[7]     Friedberg 2009, p. 151.

[8]     Ibid., p. 152.

[9]     Key early landmarks in this specific body of writing are Keathley 2011 and special issues/dossiers in *Frames Cinema Journal* (2012) and *Cinema Journal* (2013).

[10]    Deegan 2017, p. 30.

[11]    Jubb 2017, p. 24.

[12]    Friedberg 2009, p. 153.

[13]    Keathley & Mittell 2019.

[14]    http://mediacommons.org/intransition/about

[15]    Kiss & van den Berg 2016.

[16]    Ibid.

[17]    Ibid.

[18]    Ibid.

[19]    This is the title of Richard Dyer's study of the use of pop songs in film (2012).

[20]    Kiss & van den Berg 2016.

[21]    Garwood 2006

[22]    Grant 2015.

[23]    Ibid.

[24]    Baio 2008. Quoted in Kiss & van den Berg 2016.

[25]    Faden & Lee 2019.

[26]  https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/widescreen/story/201803840/online-viewing-picks-of-the-week-(9-june) 2016.

[27]  Grant 2019.

[28]  Baptista 2016.

[29]  De Fren 2019.

[30]  McCormack 2011.

[31]  Cooper 2019, p. 395.

[32]  De Fren 2019.

[33]  Cooper 2019, p. 407.

[34]  Mittell 2019.

[35]  Raferty 2018.

[36]  Mulvey 2014.

[37]  Grant 2019.

[38]  Newman 2016.

[39]  Pochoda 2012, p. 364.

[40]  Mittell 2017, p. 138.