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Teaching writing with images: The role of authorship and self-reflexivity in audiovisual essay pedagogy

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Abstract
Methodologies for teaching audiovisual essays often map the discipline-specific objectives of the form and the practical and philosophical advantages it offers as a mode of assessment. However, a particular division has emerged between the kind of work created by students and the professional audiovisual criticism circulated by critics and scholars that is considered exemplary of contemporary practice. In this context, the role of the author as a self-reflexive agent can be seen as a link not only between students' expectations of traditional written assessment and the fundamentally different imperatives of the audiovisual essay as a subjective mode of creative research, but also between audiovisual essay criticism and historical iterations of the essay form. This article explores the extensive redevelopment of a capstone undergraduate subject on audiovisual film criticism, undertaken via a fellowship awarded to develop teaching innovation and enhance curriculum design. We detail major pedagogical interventions, including a return to writing, examine key motivations in the development of course content, and establish the critical significance of encouraging students to think of themselves as authors – that is, to consider their own agency in the ways they encounter, interpret, and utilise images. Reflecting on some outcomes of the redeveloped subject, we pose it as a test case for a pedagogy that encourages students to think ambitiously with images, dissolving divisions between professional audiovisual criticism and audiovisual essays as a method of assessment. We argue that when thinking with images in this manner is embraced as a component of pedagogical methodology, students' competencies

with images can be leveraged to enable work that is academically rigorous, critically sophisticated, and evinces highly subjective authorial agency.

Orson Welles' film *F for Fake* (1972) presents students and teachers of film and media studies with a complex commentary on the ways that media texts can cultivate dominant or transgressive narratives. In the context of contemporary experiences of politics and culture it looms large as an analogy to the 'fake news ecology'[1] that shapes certain negotiations of media, and Welles appears as a sagacious figure. Presenting viewers with the stories of Elmyr de Hory, the forger, and Clifford Irving, the faker, he guides us through issues of truth and untruth, trust and mistrust, that we face as members of the digital generation. The film's largely fabricated meta-narrative about authenticity and forgery offers a pathway to a critical understanding of Welles as a filmmaker that raises questions about authorial intent and argumentative strategy. As such, *F for Fake* serves as an ideal starting point for a discussion of the interlinking practices of film criticism and the audiovisual essay. Positioned as the leading film text in a final-year undergraduate film and screen studies subject at Monash University titled The Audio Visual Essay, Welles' film initiates a sustained exploration of a set of connected concepts and concerns: the impulses of historical and contemporary forms of moving image criticism, the notion that images can function as a thinking tool, and the deployment of cinematic images to craft arguments about the self and the world.

Programming *F for Fake* as the opening film for our students was a priority decision undertaken during a major redevelopment of The Audio Visual Essay, which was made possible by an education fellowship from our university intended to develop innovation in curriculum design and delivery. The subject has been taught at our institution since 2015 and is a final-year capstone course, meaning that it is one of two advanced subjects students are required to undertake in order to graduate with a major in film and screen studies. Enrollment in the subject typically averages between 60-70 students, divided across two campuses, for a thirteen-week semester. In the context of the film and screen studies major, the subject is the first time students of film history and theory encounter the audiovisual essay in a sustained way and

are explicitly tasked with authoring their own critical audiovisual work. Positioning the audiovisual essay in this way, as an ultimate methodological encounter, recognises the networks of critical knowledge that command of the form demands, and also acknowledges the ways that the form extends and aggregates what might be termed traditional film studies with broader disciplinary concerns. Audiovisual or 'videographic' scholarship is framed by Jason Mittell as a distinct digital humanities method 'that has the potential to transform how we engage with, analyze, and convey ideas about moving image texts'.[2] Being conscious of how this 'new mode of digital scholarship'[3] may confront and confound students more familiar with the rules and rigours of traditional film studies, we conceived of The Audio Visual Essay as a semester-long reflection on a range of methods for film criticism and analysis,[4] alongside an examination of how these extant methods are transformed through an approach enabled by the digital audiovisual essay.

With these conditions in mind, our stated aims in redesigning the subject were to firstly cultivate an inclusive, collaborative semester-long process that could foster the development of critical thinking and hone sophisticated audiovisual digital literacy. That is, to create a learning environment in which students, as they encountered a range of materials and produced their own essays, could confidently see themselves as authors. Second, we aimed to highlight ways in which this kind of critical and creative work might inform pathways toward careers and/or postgraduate study for graduating students. We thus sought to emphasise the intermedial and interdisciplinary functions and potentials of audiovisual criticism and make clear its importance in developing capacities for interpreting and deploying images in the contemporary media ecologies that our students inhabit in their everyday lives (which are defined by the very issues of truth, subterfuge, and perception evident in *F for Fake*). There are a range of documented approaches to audiovisual essay pedagogy that offer pathways toward achieving these aims. The digital humanities approach pioneered by Mittell with Christian Keathley focuses on exercises with strict formal requirements.[5] A theoretically rich approach detailed by Michael Witt foregrounds, via Laura Mulvey and Nicole Brenez, concerns for the ontology of the image invited by digital technologies and encourages open-mindedness and experimentation.[6] Taking these methodological developments into account, our approach was also necessarily informed by the specificities of our students' degree progression and centred on a return to critical and reflective writing as a means of encouraging and organising students' thinking. This focus on writing as an important part of

audiovisual essay pedagogy has been signalled by Letizi elsewhere and hones in on 'the often-contradictory features of personal, transgressive, sincere, and even playful forms of expression' that audiovisual scholarship makes possible'.[7] Writing becomes, in this sense, a way of aiming toward the type of thought process that Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin consider 'a comprehensive, holistic act of cognition, feeling, sensation, elaboration and reflection'[8] that sits at the heart of audiovisual essay practice.

In this article we will explore the imperatives behind our redesign of this subject and detail our pedagogical interventions. Thus, the article's trajectory will mirror our own processes of conceptualising the redeveloped subject, which we began by considering the importance of authorship to the ongoing relevance of the essay film. We will discuss several key components of our redevelopment and describe major adjustments: how we mapped variable forms of the audiovisual essay for students; a persistent, purposeful emphasis on reflective writing as integral to the development of authorial agency; the alignment of teaching materials (compulsory audiovisual and reading material) toward a rigorous critical practice; and the significant pedagogical advantages of implementing an end-of-semester public screening event. We will forego extensive detail concerning instruction of audiovisual production[9] and accounts of students' audiovisual projects in order to detail our pedagogical methods and situate key aspects of our redevelopment within particular historical and theoretical frameworks.

The most incisive contribution that *F for Fake* makes to our subject's exploration of different modes of authorship, argumentation, and criticism lies in its shrewd dismantling of cinema's artifices. Welles' film, as James Naremore posits in his important book *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, 'is directly confronting the essential "lie" upon which the movies are built – the editing process'.[10] For students who are still coming to terms with the formal machinations underpinning the medium, this confrontation lays bare systems of narrative manipulation and authorial intervention. The process of exposing and dismantling cinematic convention is consolidated in the film's iconic figuration of Welles as, in his own words, a 'hanky panky man' and 'charlatan': bearded and dressed in black, a gloved magician lurking at the edges of the frame waiting to intercede. Welles' complex approach to the dismantling of artifice is succinctly highlighted in Benjamin Sampson's audiovisual essay 'Layers of Paradox in F for Fake' (2009), which was also compulsory viewing for students, and Sampson describes Welles as a complex authorial figure: 'many authors filtered through the mind of one author'.[11]

Weaving his arguments about forgery, Welles embodies an understanding of the film author as one who not only creates texts but intervenes in and appropriates other texts with intent both mischievous and sincere, manipulating images and stories to make claims about how the self sits in relation to the world.

Fig. 1: Four stills highlighting Welles' sustained commentary on authorship in F for Fake.

Understanding Welles in this manner, we see how he adopts the methods of an essayist. Though *F for Fake* defies straightforward classification, as it offers critically engaged reflections on the arts while articulating its director's own experiences, it embodies many tendencies associated with the essay film. In particular, given the way that Welles' singular voice becomes the locus for an array of appropriations and fabrications, it appeals to Nora Alter's identification of the essay film as a category that 'produces complex thought that at times is not grounded in reality' and is 'transgressive, digressive, playful, contradictory, and political', unbound to fact (as documentary is), and filled with 'artistic potentiality'.[12] The film's rhetoric is grounded in Welles' appearance and subjective disposition, and in this manner it also gels with Timothy Corrigan's description of essay modes as having the capacity to 'test and explore subjectivity as it encounters a public life'.[13] At the beginning of a semester-long exploration of film criticism and the audiovisual essay, then, *F for Fake* becomes exemplary of a range of formal and rhetorical tendencies,

being as Drew Morton notes 'a prototype of the visual essay'.[14] More significantly though, it demonstrates how an author can carve paths toward new meaning by filtering, disputing, and consolidating other voices, navigating and sometimes appropriating images of distinct formal and generic orientations, and staking claims (sometimes clearly, sometimes less so) about the role that art, and especially moving image art, can play in the world.

Mapping the audiovisual essay as part of a critical continuum

There are many tensions when teaching a subject that focuses intently on the audiovisual essay, largely due to its relatively recent advent as a form enabled by digital technologies. One particular source of tension lies in often-competing institutional and disciplinary mandates: a university directs pedagogical agendas for innovation, while our discipline obliges the upholding of particular academic traditions and bodies of knowledge. This can precipitate, as Álvarez López and Martin write, a certain 'authoritative judgement' against audiovisual practice that 'will always devolve to the written, printed word, with its long-established, weightily institutionalised protocols of elaborately explicated, self-justified argument'.[15] There is an apparent loss of certainty when the written word is replaced by images and sounds, which seem more slippery in the ways that they hinge on subjective thought. Introducing audiovisual essay practice to third-year students accustomed to how film studies is taught and assessed at our university presents additional challenges that highlight the need, described in this context by Vincent Longo, 'for educators to explicitly facilitate students' thinking about the connections between form, content, and argument'.[16] Our redevelopment of The Audio Visual Essay was guided by a desire to facilitate this type of thinking, connecting familiar rhetorical strategies with concerns for audiovisual form in an attempt to reconcile institutional and disciplinary tensions.

A way forward became apparent with careful consideration of where and how to situate essayistic tendencies in our conceptualisation of the audiovisual essay. Reflecting on essay forms, Corrigan poses three related modes – the essay, the essayistic, and essayism – that, holding the self in encounter with the world, 'generate and monitor the possibilities of thought and thinking about public life'.[17] This type of encounter and interaction is similarly posed by Morton, who contends that the essay essentially 'seeks to locate the

universal in the personal',[18] and more explicitly in the realm of the essay film Paul Arthur describes a particular 'rhetorical focus' that is 'at once directed outward to concrete facts and inward to a realm of mercurial reflection'.[19] An emphasis on the capacity of essay forms to enact this relational dynamic between inner thought and the world at large points to a stylistic and philosophical understanding of the audiovisual essay that we elected to prioritise. As we introduced the audiovisual essay to students we thus worked to acknowledge how, as a form, it reflects multifarious notions of the essay and the essayistic in a number of important ways. First, it is a powerful tool for criticism and commentary (and university assessment). Second, it is a rhetorical mode that bears relevance across multiple discursive spheres and media ecologies. Third, it is a discipline-specific method that continues to develop the pillars of film studies, cultivating textual analysis, mise-en-scène, auteurism, and cinephilia.

A key philosophical impetus for the pedagogical adjustments of our subject redesign rests on our framing of the essay, broadly, as a form of engagement with texts and the world that elevates intellectual considerations while also allowing for argumentation that involves self-reflexive personal inquiry. The essay film, therefore, becomes a significant piece of connective tissue, conjoining students' familiar understandings of the essay with audiovisual media and signalling how images can be part of, or even wholly constitute, a rhetorical address. Understanding the essay as an engagement that is both intellectually rigorous and highly personal is crucial to Phillip Lopate's definition of the essay film – indeed, these orientations constitute two of the five definitive formal qualities he details. An essay film, he writes, 'must represent the speaker's attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem' and simultaneously 'impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view'.[20] With this framing in mind, discussion with students about how *F for Fake* and its complex layering of narrative and meta-narrative are enmeshed within and emerge from the dynamic of Welles asserting his authorial legacy in the face of reputational damage inflicted by Pauline Kael's notorious claims about *Citizen Kane* (1941)[21] leads to an understanding of how formal innovations can be intimately linked to an author's subjective experiences. In our redesign of The Audio Visual Essay, we thus positioned the audiovisual essay as a logical contemporary extension of the kind of critical work performed by Welles.

There is, however, some risk involved in using the notion of the essay to ascribe a practical and philosophical framework to disparate texts that otherwise defy categorisation. Laura Rascaroli explicitly suggests caution in the realm of the essay film:

> The temptation of assigning the label of essay film to all that is non-commercial or experimental or unclassifiable must, however, be resisted, or else the term will cease being epistemologically useful, and we will end up equating very diverse films […] which have very little in common aside the extensive voice-over and the fact that they […] present problems of classification.[22]

We hazarded this type of risk, however, in order to frame the possibilities and potentials afforded by the audiovisual essay. The categorisation of *F for Fake* as an essay film is not necessarily straightforward, though Sampson notes Welles himself considered it a 'visual essay'.[23] Consideration of Welles' film and Sampson's audiovisual essay, though, constituted an entry point for our students to a world of innovations in moving image argumentation amidst a complex continuum of practice. An approach to the question of the essay that usefully incorporates the critical and the personal while also being open to formal variance is signalled in Theodor Adorno's position that in the written essay

> concepts do not form a continuum of operations. Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet.[24]

This proposition is particularly true of contemporary audiovisual essay practice, where the weave of the carpet is made even more complex because its constitution is owed not only to its status as a continuation of the already-established dual practices of the essay film and film criticism, but also to innovations in digital technologies and evolved online media environments that reinvigorate those practices. Consequently, as Erlend Lavik notes in an early reflection on the potentials of the audiovisual essay, the form is 'highly varied and very hard to categorize'.[25]

In order to address the complex variations of form and style that would confront our students new to the audiovisual essay, we sought to delineate between different approaches to the form. Thus, in the second week of the semester we offered students a schematic map of five prevalent approaches to argumentation and essayistic considerations: analytical, poetic, multimodal, recontextualisation/reappropriation, and the desktop documentary. It is important to emphasise that these descriptions are meant to both clarify

the state of the field and guide students towards crafting essays for assessment rather than to impose rigidly defined categories of practice. In particular, we isolated two dominant styles – the analytical and poetic modes – that sit at opposite ends of a spectrum as a way of articulating the methods and form of the remaining three. The analytical style, typified by a pronounced use of documentary conventions such as voiceover and/or on-screen text and a focus on textual analysis, was introduced via Álvarez López and Martin's 'When You Read This Letter' (2018). In contrast, the poetic audiovisual essay usually derives its form, meaning, and authorial register from an inversion of the analytical style's composition: no voiceover or text on-screen (if included, the use is evocative rather than descriptive), the essay resembles subjective and personal thinking, and formal elements are understood as symbolic and metaphorical. Here, Kogonada's seminal 'Hands of Bresson' (2014), with its elegiac reflection on movement and gesture, demonstrated to students the way that authorial voice can be entrenched within complex layers of images and sounds rather than sitting above both elements (as it does in Martin's voiceover in 'When You Read This Letter'). With this style, students were cautioned against conflating the seductive potential of combining highly affective images and music as a kind of shorthand poetic aesthetic with the nuanced approach of essays like Kogonada's, which subtly balances affective impulses and analytical ideas within its poetic grammar.

Fig. 2: Four stills from Kogonada's 'Hands of Bresson'.

The formal structures of these two dominant styles are the building blocks for the remaining three styles introduced to students, with identifiable elements of the analytical and poetic being rearranged and repurposed towards the three other styles' distinct means. Multi-modal essays incorporate both analytical and poetic devices and seek to express the connectedness of a single example to a network of others (see 'Beyond the Screen #nofilter' (2019) by Maria Hoffmann). A fourth style, essays that recontextualise/reappropriate images and sounds, is indeed poetic, though their focus is often on the strangeness and uncanny qualities of phenomena that have been disassociated from their original context (see 'The Apartment' (2018) by David Verdeure). Finally, the desktop documentary, popularised by Kevin B. Lee and exemplified in his *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) and Chloé Galibert-Laîné's *Watching the Pain of Others* (2018), uses the computer interface and the internet as a live archive of images, sounds, and meaning, but perhaps more importantly treats both as portals to unexpected discovery. In explicating all five styles with these corresponding examples of professional practice, we placed emphasis on the students' discovery and identification of authorial signatures and highlighted how the essay's subjective perspective allows authors to negotiate, appropriate, and recalibrate pre-existing audiovisual material.

Surveying the state of contemporary audiovisual essay practice and its key forebears also helped to address a stumbling block that, in previous iterations of this subject, had inhibited student confidence and limited competencies with regard to thinking with images. To summarise a recurring challenge in this subject: an inability to clearly identify different approaches to the audiovisual essay and situate them in relation to essayistic traditions and other media forms (perhaps combined with the urgency of impending assessment deadlines) had meant that audiovisual essays tended to impose the style and form of a conventional written academic essay over a montage of images and sounds, with relatively little attention to technical proficiency or form. There is also a sense, in film studies as a discipline, that incorporating audiovisual essays as assessment tasks may risk a departure from time-honoured methods centred on traditional assessments (i.e. the written essay) that are seen as evincing more rigorous scholarship. The audiovisual essay's value and, indeed, its transformative potential in the face of these challenges is concisely articulated by Kevin B. Lee:

> Despite their seemingly secondary or derivative stature, [audiovisual essays] bore a
> potential to emerge as a transformative form of image-making, bearing a special

kind of autonomy engendered by a singular combination of the creative and the critical that is unique to the form.[26]

Energised by Lee's optimism, as we mapped out audiovisual essay practice for students, we emphasised its unique capacity to inject the personal into critical engagements, and to clarify its intellectual rigour. All of this connects with notions of authorship in criticism: the classification of styles accentuates ways that different subjective voices are mediated through images and sounds and draws attention to how the subjective and potentially transgressive qualities of the essay can be activated through particular styles.

A return to writing

In seeking to transform this vast discursive field into both a manageable and effective pedagogy, it was apparent that a methodology largely centred on practical skills and strategies would not only obscure the subject's ongoing interest in situating the audiovisual essay as a critical and theoretical tool, but also fail to cultivate a certain confidence in subjective and personal thinking. Thus, we made a radical shift that sought to embolden the subjective voice and realign the subject with traditional modes of criticism and the essay: a return to writing. This renewed emphasis on writing refutes a contemporary inclination to separate the audiovisual essay as distinct from writing, and instead aligns audiovisual thinking with the epistolary form as a mode of address common to the essay film, typified by Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), *A.K.* (1985), and *Le tombeau d'Alexandre* (1992), or Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977). In recent years we can also observe the epistolary process at work in the collaboratively authored audiovisual essay work of Lee and Galibert-Laîné (*Bottled Songs* [2019]) and Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed's essay film *Purple Sea* (2020), where the act of letter writing is part of the creative process as much as it is integral to their form. Seeking to progress the connection between subjective writing and filmmaking, Kim Munro posits,

> To write a letter is to traverse the space between the I and the You. The epistle also allows the filmmaker to perform their authorial subjectivity as a relational entity, always shifting, depending on who it comes in contact with and the context in which it is seen.[27]

This type of insistence on the epistle 'as a cinematic device'[28] that maintains a sense of writing as a relational act, positioning the author as always in

negotiation with an other (a reader, a viewer, another text), prompted an explorative desire to institute writing as an ongoing activity throughout the semester. By probing the extent of the synergy between the act of writing and essaying in an audiovisual context, we hoped to guide our students' toward honing the agencies and relational capacities of their authorial voices.

Of course, the association between writing and cinema is longstanding and far from radical. However, in the context of our contemporary digital environment writing has become increasingly democratic and pervasive (for example, dissolved barriers between professional and non-professional critics), but its ongoing value and authority seem to have waned somewhat. Indeed, this subject's turn to audiovisual essays as both a point of focus and as the primary mode of assessment can be seen as exemplary of large-scale shifts in critical practice and institutional adaptation away from writing. In this new environment, one can observe a greater push towards visual thinking from institutions and students, and a prevalent impulse to address the contemporary image culture by reflecting it: essentially, to think via images rather than with words. Our emphasis on writing is not, however, a response or push back against this digital milieu, but rather a way to embolden more rigorous scholarship within it. In particular, a return to writing posits a number of distinct ideas: that criticism does not materialise as an afterthought of the original text but rather replies to it, rejoining it in a substantive way; that audiovisual essays emerge from processes of intensive relational investigation; and that constructing an authorial style and voice necessitates rigorous self-reflection. The process of writing, at risk of becoming a secondary form of communication and self-expression, returns because it demands a more precise form of articulation that is mirrored by the requirements of the audiovisual essay, and the act of putting pen to paper might call for a type of commitment that images or writing on digital devices does not.

Thus ensued a weekly activity: directly after every film screening, students were given time to produce a piece of reflective writing. At the beginning of the semester, expectations for this activity were set. We wanted students to dissociate themselves from the rigidity of conventional forms of academic essay writing (an introduction, body, and conclusion) and instead allow their perceptions of the moving image text they had just encountered to emerge. Here, a fragmentary thought, a particularly resonant moment, an uncovered theme, the use of a colour and so on, were all prime examples of the kinds of phenomena to be valued. Furthermore, students were also encouraged to think freely by drawing subjective associations or allowing a

thought or idea to remain unresolved. At the heart of this approach, then, was a cultivated ethos of experimentation and letting the text under consideration guide a subjective reflection. This openness to experimentation resonates with Witt's approach to audiovisual essay pedagogy, which stresses 'a boldness in the face of experimentation, a receptiveness to the unexpected perspectives and discoveries that audiovisual analysis throws up, and a willingness to disregard received technical and aesthetic norms'.[29] The act of writing is conceived of, in this sense, as making possible the emergence of an agency that John Conomos names 'the artist-writer as self-interrogator, as trickster' who 'crosses the thresholds of multiple forms, always attempting to dig deep, to mingle things, perennially engaged in boundary-creation and boundary-crossing'.[30]

The real turning point in this activity occurred at the conclusion of the writing time, as students were asked to share whatever they were willing to divulge from their writing with a classmate or in small groups. Installing this methodology from the very beginning of the semester meant that the sharing phase of the activity engendered a new kind of rigour to the writing process. That is to say, students' knowledge that they would soon share their reflections with others cultivated an air of expectation, sincerity, and surprisingly a renewed engagement with the screening material prior to writing. In week four, for example, students watched John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), and prior to class were asked to read Ross Gibson's analytical article 'The Searchers – Dismantled'. Upon the conclusion of the film, students were given fifteen minutes of writing time; they were encouraged to utilise Gibson's article, but more specifically the evocative style of his prose, as a pathway through to their own interpretations and sensory experiences. Once students had shared their writing with each other they were then asked to return to the film and analyse a scene or sequence of their choosing. This process had the effect of disarticulating the students from the conventions of academic essay writing that they had become accustomed to, yet stimulated by the opportunity to treat their subjective activity seriously they could then return to the text to perform more incisive analytical work.

While such an intense focus on personal writing and sharing may at first seem antithetical to the practice of working with images to create audiovisual essays, this personal approach speaks to the subjectivity of the audiovisual essay and encourages an authorial voice to emerge. In this regard, the pedagogical challenge rests in large part on the cultivation of a supportive classroom environment where students feel confident to take risks and perhaps

more importantly are not assessed (personally or academically) based on their output in these sessions. Moreover, these experimentations in self-reflexive thinking and expression did not necessarily directly inform students' final audiovisual essay projects. They were, rather, designed to build confidence and develop a dynamic between creative and critical approaches. Links between these writing activities and audiovisual essay production are, however, direct. In a formative piece of writing that seeks to clarify the features of the audiovisual essay, Christian Keathley inquires, 'the question … is how to develop a rhetoric that 'matches' a mode of presentation consisting of moving images and sounds – a mode that is therefore as much poetic as it is explanatory'.[31] A return to writing, via experimentations with style, is a way to match these imperatives by rousing the author, situating students as the bearers of new meaning. The proposition of this innovation suggests that if students develop the ability to articulate their subjective experiences of films in complex and nuanced ways then they are developing the very skills required for the production of mature, eloquent audiovisual essays. On a grander scale, a focus on writing firmly situates the audiovisual essay within the traditions of the essay and the essayistic, articulated by Corrigan, Lopate, and others, that we have highlighted above, and thus as part of a more expansive, historically grounded critical continuum.

Aligning learning materials

A further substantial pedagogical intervention was a total reset on the chronology and composition of weekly topics and the required screening and reading material, all with the objective of realigning the subject to prioritise the audiovisual essay from the outset. In previous iterations of this subject, the history of criticism was foregrounded through a series of critical approaches that ostensibly led to the advent of the audiovisual essay. Yet within this framework, the former was privileged over the latter, meaning that the subject was still very much embedded within the methodologies of what might now be considered traditional film studies. This preoccupation concealed the audiovisual essay and its complex and varied styles from students until the final week of the semester, by which time students were already producing their final assessment: an audiovisual essay. Situating the audiovisual essay in this way, as a kind of coda to a chronological study of criticism,

also had the effect of disassociating the subject's various materials – screenings, readings, and in-class activities – from many of the objectives we proposed at the core of our redesign (an invigoration of students' authorial agency).

A realignment of content was designed to speak directly to our return to writing, and in so doing create direct and integrated relationships between the material being screened each week, the required reading, and the weekly writing activity. In particular, a review of previous syllabi revealed a prioritisation of theoretical and historical perspectives on criticism over works of criticism themselves. Drawing back to our reasons for mapping audiovisual essay styles, a fair summation would be that with little exposure to different modalities of criticism, the development of literacy in the aesthetic, political, and personal dimensions of criticism remained limited. From this perspective our redesign privileged exceptional works of film criticism that responded to a particular text, and accordingly these texts became the weekly screenings prior to our seminar sessions. Much like the aforementioned link between Gibson's 'The Searchers – Dismantled' and Ford's film, a week on mise-en-scène criticism, for example, began with Martin's 'A Walk Through Carlito's Way', which the students were required to read prior to viewing Brian De Palma's 1993 film. Via a combination of self-reflexive and critical writing strategies, Martin's article moves through a crucial sequence in the film by foregrounding a collection of audiovisual details that range from compositional and editing formations to the distinct qualities of sound in the sequence, and therefore the film. Our experience of the film is reimagined through Martin's ability to precisely identify the scene's structure and affectivity, but in his revelation of a logic system unique to De Palma, Martin also foregrounds a crucial function of film criticism, deconstructing and responding to a text that is further enriched through a consideration of its author as both a site and instrument of meaning.

Shaping the weekly material in this way created an experiential learning environment where the cumulative effect of this structure, as it is repeated each week, was to celebrate the relationship between written criticism and screen texts. Because this framework remained relatively stable week-to-week, the subject promoted a renewed focus on the diverse modes that critics have adopted in order to address a text. Once again foregrounding agency and subjective experience, the weekly process of matching film or television texts with valuable pieces of criticism also helped to simulate the moment of

first encounter with a text. Students experienced both original text and criticism anew multiple times: initially in their first viewing, again after consulting the critic's response, and once more through their own reflective writing activity. The final extension of these ongoing critical practices was the preparation and production of their own audiovisual essays, due for an in-class screening in the last week of the semester.

A critical and public encounter

The final major intervention we made as we redeveloped this subject was to provision an additional, public screening of selected student essays that either best reflected one of the five audiovisual essay styles we highlighted or truly embodied the subjective perspective encouraged through our semester-long privileging of essayistic and epistolary modes. This screening was attended by students and faculty but was also open to non-university guests, and it concluded with an address from noted Australian critic Lesley Chow, who gave sustained feedback on student essays, including specific suggestions for further refinement and advice on where essays could be submitted for exhibition or publication in the future. The event also ostensibly functioned as a celebration for graduating students: it took place at the conclusion of the academic year after they had completed all assessment tasks and was followed with food, drinks, and further discussion. Beyond this, however, it marked a significant end point in the students' trajectory through the subject (and indeed their degrees in film and screen studies) whereby they became authors in a more complete, more public, and perhaps more reflexive sense than a university course might traditionally allow – their critical work was exposed to the world and, in turn, encountered criticism from beyond the university.

Students were informed of this screening and the opportunity for industry engagement that it potentially offered them at the beginning of the semester. The knowledge that it was impending thus held an important pedagogical function, providing an incentive to calibrate ambitions beyond simply satisfying the requirements of an assessment task, encouraging them to aim for a professional standard of critical engagement with texts and technical production. Strikingly, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, all but one of the seven essays screened worked in a poetic or multi-modal style,

their authors foregoing the previously standardised practice (in prior iterations of this subject) to impose a written essay, via narration, over a montage of images and sounds. Instead, the essays embodied the lessons that materialised through close study of the subject's diverse collection of critics, educators, artists, and theorists, and in turn reflected the kind of personalised, dialogic experimentation cultivated through the weekly writing activities. What these seven essays told us, which was affirmed in Chow's feedback to each, was that setting up authors like Lee, Álvarez López and Martin, Kogonada, Hoffman, etc. (and their associated stylistic and philosophical imperatives) as models helped dissolve students' perceptions of the distinction between professional work and their own capacities, freeing them to produce more ambitious, rigorous, and creative audiovisual criticism. The dissolution of this distinction highlighted the broad relevance of the work students were being asked to produce (as well as the theoretically informed thinking underpinning it) to professional industrial contexts such as film festivals, critical and popular online publications, and public institutions.

If setting a public screening of essays had the effect of raising expectations for the subject by establishing firmer connections to professional and industrial contexts and encouraging greater agency at the level of undergraduate scholarship, we might pause to reflect on the status and function of critical methodologies in academic contexts. Lavik posits that 'academic film criticism has gone a bit stale', noting that 'the best analyses offer something that is both unexpected and plausible, yet all too rarely do I come across scholarly work that deftly steers a course between . . . the obvious and the far-fetched'.[32] The audiovisual essay, he suggests, offers a path forward in this context as it 'enables us to strike a better balance' by enlivening critical observations while also reining in 'excessively fanciful observations'.[33] In the manner suggested by Lavik, we sought to redevelop our pedagogy to navigate between, first, the obvious: comprehension of theoretical and conceptual material; second, the necessary, rigorous assessment of media literacies; and third, the potentially far-fetched – creative interpretation, subjective authorial impositions, and flights of fancy. Incorporating these impulses in a pedagogy for the audiovisual essay makes clear the broader relevance of its discipline-specific approach to utilising images as a thinking tool, enhancing understandings of the subjective and affective role that the moving image plays in the personal experience of daily life. Presenting a collection of the results of this process at our screening event, for public and critical scrutiny, validated both the efficacy of the audiovisual essay as an academic assessment

mode and the power of the student voice that is enabled when their authorial agency is privileged and supported.

Students becoming authors

In the first seminar of The Audio Visual Essay, following a screening of *F for Fake*, students were asked to respond to the film in writing, with Sampson's audiovisual essay 'Layers of Paradox in F for Fake' as a critical prompt. This was perhaps the most challenging writing activity they were tasked with during the semester, not only because it was the first such activity and proceeded contra to their expectations for in-class tasks, but because Welles' film and Sampson's essay both address complex historical disputes and discussions, consolidating and adding layers of argumentation about the role of the author in filmmaking and criticism. Sampson's essay concisely explicates these layers by citing several critics including Jonathan Rosenbaum, Joseph McBride, and François Truffaut in order to locate *F for Fake* as, in Truffaut's words, a 'riposte' to the attempts of another critic, Pauline Kael, to discredit Welles' prior authorship of *Citizen Kane* (Fig. 3). In this dynamic, Welles is understood to be responding to Kael's attack on his authorial capacities, thereby initiating a cascading dialogue between works of criticism – Truffaut, Rosenbaum, McBride, Sampson – that continue to reflexively rejoin another. In asking students to situate themselves in this dialogue, we tasked them with confronting the critical construction of authorship and how it is located, mediated, and, in Welles' case, problematised.
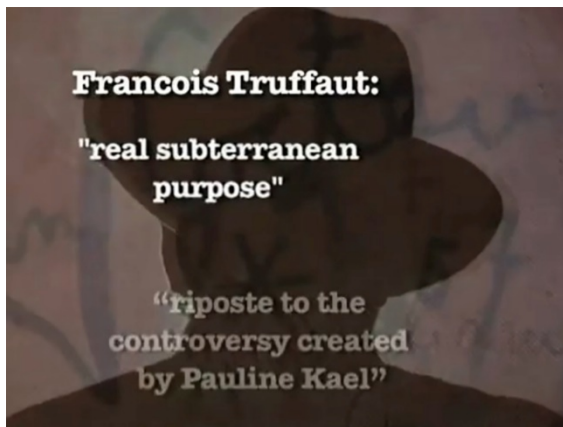

Fig. 3: Benjamin Sampson's 'Layers of Paradox in F for Fake' (2009).

About half-way through 'Layers of Paradox in F for Fake', Sampson, having filtered numerous critical perspectives, issues his own interpretation on the discursive searching for Welles' complex authorship in *F for Fake* via voiceover narration:

> I believe Orson Welles is using a paradox: that the art is much more important than the artist, and the artist is much more important than the art. That both are most important.[34]

This notion, Sampson's own authorial intervention, helps to articulate the ongoing resonance of *F for Fake* and situate it as a significant commentary on authorship and the processes of decipherment and subterfuge (analysis and interpretation) at work between critic and creator, and between art and the discourses that respond to it.

For students, the insights gleaned from the immense network of authors in this example – Welles, de Hory, Irving, as well as Kael, McBride, Rosenbaum, Truffaut and Sampson – are significant and paradigm-shifting. In reflecting on this diverse discourse that transcends media and modes and cultural spheres, our students began to realise the command and influence of authorship as it is expressed through professional and academic film criticism, films, and audiovisual essays. What becomes clear is that the process of responding to moving image texts impacts upon itself in an unending continuum, new meaning is forever yet to be encountered, and the audiovisual essay is embedded in the generative and relational powers of these dynamics of persistence and potential. Yet the unerring truth of Sampson's Welles paradox, reconfigured, perhaps offers the most resounding edict for students: the text is much more important than the author, and the author is more important than the text – and both are equally important. Fashioned through this premise, The Audio Visual Essay now locates students as part of this ongoing practice as authors with agency that is personal and political, transgressive and reflective.

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Notes

[1]   Reilly 2018, p. 139.

[2]   Mittell 2019, p. 226.

[3]   Ibid.

[4]   The subject's weekly topics in chronological order: the essay film; the audiovisual essay; author-ship and the Cahiers critics; textual analysis; mise-en-scène criticism; cinephilia and reception; intertextuality; seriality and relationality; from digital criticism to desktop documentary.

[5]   Keathley & Mittell 2019.

[6]   Witt 2017.

[7]   Letizi 2019.

[8]   Álvarez López & Martin 2019.

[9]   Students had the option of completing an intensive two-week editing module on Adobe Premiere that was devised and taught by technical instructors.

[10]   Naremore 1978, p. 247.

[11]   Sampson 2009.

[12]   Alter 2002, p. 7.

[13]   Corrigan 2016, p. 15.

[14]   Morton 2014.

[15]   Álvarez López & Martin 2017.

[16]   Longo 2019.

[17]   Corrigan 2016, p.15

[18]   Morton 2017, p. 131.

[19]   Arthur 2003, p. 60.

[20]   Lopate 1992, p. 19.

[21]   Kael 1971.

[22]   Rascaroli 2008, p. 25.

[23]   Sampson 2009.

[24]   Adorno 1991, pp. 37-38.

[25]   Lavik 2012b.

[26]   Lee 2014.

[27]   Munro 2017, p. 82.

[28]   Ibid.

[29]   Witt 2017.

[30]   Conomos 2016, p. 93.

[31]   Keathley 2012.

[32]   Lavik 2012a

[33]   Ibid.

[34]   Sampson 2009.