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Workshop of Potential Scholarship: Manifesto for a parametric videographic criticism

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Abstract

This article sets out the rationale for a videographic scholarship (the audiovisual study of screen media) that adopts constraint-based or 'parametric' procedures, and concludes with a short manifesto composed according to the simple constraint of division into ten equal segments of 50 words each. The article situates a parametric practice in relation to OuLiPo (a group founded in the early 1960s to explore constraint-based approaches to writing), to pataphysics (an absurdist branch of knowledge concerned with what eludes understanding by conventional means), to themes in the digital humanities, and to the posthuman. And it issues a call to forge an 'agonistic society' of videographic scholars who goad each other to greater achievement through the conspicuous and wasteful expenditure of resources of knowledge.

Keywords: constraints, cyborg, Donna Haraway, enactment, OuLiPo, pataphysics, posthuman, potlatch, video essay

Introduction: OuScholPo

This essay proposes a rationale for a constraint-based or 'parametric' practice of videographic scholarship and is followed by a 500-word manifesto composed according to the simple constraint of division into ten equal segments of 50 words each. My title alludes to OuLiPo, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Literature), a group founded in the early 1960s to explore constraint-based approaches to writing. OuLiPo proposed

the acronym Ou-X-Po to envisage possible fields (designated by 'X') that might themselves adopt parametric procedures.[1] What I want to set out here is an OuScholPo, where 'Schol' stands for videographic scholarship.[2]

Videographic scholarship refers to the audiovisual analysis of audiovisual material and screen media, often in the form of video essays. As a medium of academic practice, videographic scholarship has in recent years become increasingly mainstream and is produced in a range of modes from the illustrated lecture to something closer to video art, a range often distilled to an opposition, first suggested by Christian Keathley, between explanatory and poetic approaches.[3] My proselytising here for a parametric approach locates my aesthetic and epistemological sympathies at the poetic pole, even if the claim to scholarly status of such work is still contested.[4]

By parametric scholarship I have in mind the adoption, by the videographic scholar, of more or less arbitrary *self-imposed constraints* on the selection of elements from the media object(s) or phenomena studied, and on the formal means by which the analysis is undertaken or presented.[5] Parametric approaches are already widely used and taught. Forms like the supercut – 'parametric' because it restricts its focus to instances of a particular motif, trope, or formal element – are employed in academic as well as popular domains, and have been theorised in recent articles by senior practitioners Allison de Fren and Ian Garwood, discussed below.[6] Constraint-based exercises are used to teach videographic criticism at the influential Scholarship in Sound and Image workshops at Middlebury College, and the Middlebury exercises have come to be adopted by teachers elsewhere.[7]

The Middlebury exercises have also been set for his listeners by Will Di-Gravio of the Video Essay Podcast as a way of promoting a virtual community of practice.[8] I am myself concerned here to cultivate a reflexive constituency of scholarly practitioners, and this is why the article ends with a manifesto. However, I do not conceive this constituency in terms of community, exactly. John G. Caputo has pointed out that *communitas*, the Latin root of community, originally denoted 'a military formation, referring to the common defence we build against the other'.[9] Arguably, the idea of community retains this connotation of fortification against the outsider, but the practice I have in mind is one instead performed *for* and addressed *to* the other. As set out below, I want to envisage an agonistic society of videographic critics who goad each other to greater achievement through a conspicuous and wasteful expenditure of resources of knowledge.

Following this introduction, I place the practice of OuScholPo (like that of OuLiPo before it) in the tradition of pataphysics, an absurdist branch of knowledge concerned with what eludes understanding by standard scholarly means. The subsequent section begins with David Bordwell's classic discussion of 'parametric narration' in order to imagine a scholarship more concerned with texture and affect than interpretation and argument. By way of illustration, I propose a well-known supercut by Catherine Grant and go on to consider Allison de Fren's strong objection to work of this sort in terms of its attitude to data. To answer this objection, I invoke Johanna Drucker's critique of the concept of 'data' itself, and I argue for a performative ethics of videographic practice as *enactment* rather than argument. Such a practice does not lend itself to conceptualisation as 'knowledge production': drawing on ideas from Rebecca Herzig and Georges Bataille, and illustrating my account with video essays by Ian Garwood and Matt Payne, I argue instead for a 'wasteful' knowledge practice, a videographic 'potlatch' in which precious goods (here, knowledge) are squandered by the scholar in the act of engaging her peers. Work that adopts a profligate attitude to knowledge may find its claim to scholarly status challenged, and the essay closes, before the short manifesto itself, with a restatement of why the practice of OuScholPo should be considered scholarship.

This article is, then, designed to intervene in an ongoing debate on the 'proper' character of videographic scholarship.[10] It does so by situating videographic practice in relation to OuLiPo and pataphysics, to themes in the digital humanities and also to the posthuman. By the posthuman, I mean a set of ideas that present the human in relational terms, as always already coinciding with technology, and that displace the human itself as the sole locus of agency or cognition. Cary Wolfe has written that 'posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentring of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore'.[11] But the debate on the proper character of videographic scholarship *has* ignored the implications of this decentring, even as opportunities for thinking it have emerged with the development of the practice.

In their essay describing the parametric exercises used at the Middlebury workshops, Keathley and Mittell observe that 'formal parameters lead to content discoveries':[12] the adoption of constraints helps the scholar to sidestep analytic preconceptions and allows the 'media object' of study to be seen and heard anew. An implication of this is that parametric approaches to video-

graphic criticism may (be developed to) constitute a *posthuman mode of knowing*, emerging with and from the assemblage of hardware, parametric system, software, and organism. 'We are all chimeras', Donna Haraway famously wrote in her 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' of 1985, 'hybrids of machine and organism'.[13] Since then, we scholars have (e)merged ever more with the digital. The challenge is to imagine a scholarship that speaks *from* this cyborg position and does not just speak *about* it. My conviction is that a parametric videographic scholarship – OuScholPo – can do this.

Videographic pataphysics

Those who have responded to the OuLiPo's invitation to adopt parametric procedures have tended to be active in fields, like architecture or painting, seen as creative or artistic rather than scholarly or scientific. I will be insisting here on a practice, OuScholPo, that defines itself *as scholarship* even as it adopts artistic means. To that end, I want to place OuScholPo beyond any oppositions between any 'two cultures' of art and science, or science and humanities, in the tradition known as pataphysics that also nurtured OuLiPo itself.

Pataphysics refers to a 'science of imaginary solutions' that has informed speculative creativity in the arts, philosophy, literary criticism and, more recently, the digital humanities, since the premature death of its progenitor, French writer Alfred Jarry, in 1907. Writing of the practice and possibilities of an algorithmic literary criticism with analogies to my project here, Stephen Ramsay himself invokes the model of pataphysics to envisage 'a common imaginative ground between art and science', 'a third culture that is at once the product of both scientific and artistic investigation'.[14] Jarry describes pataphysics in one text as follows:

> Pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general. Pataphysics will examine the laws which govern exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one [...].[15]

The word 'science' may seem out of place here for a practice that is self-avowedly useless – the mock-pompous term the pataphysicians themselves use is 'inutilious'[16] – but it serves to endow with epistemological dignity the

pataphysical attitude to activities of knowing. Pataphysics 'studies the particulars and exceptions that ultimately inhabit and subvert the generalising assumptions of traditional scientific systems'.[17] Moreover, it 'refuses to see the relativity of perspective as a barrier to knowledge',[18] and so proffers a 'doctrine of Equivalence' that grants no privilege of objectivity to any single viewpoint.[19]

Ramsay finds an equivalent to this pataphysical attitude in the practice of the scientific thought experiment, which deploys speculative scenarios to cast light on a reality resistant to illumination by conventional means. Noting that pataphysics was a key touchstone for the founders of OuLiPo, Ramsay writes: 'Pataphysics, Oulipian constraint, and the tradition of the thought experiment all gesture toward a vanishing point at which the distinctions between art, criticism, and science dissolve.'[20] The Oulipian employment of self-imposed constraints works like the 'controlling of variables in a laboratory setting' – sometimes, of course, referred to as *parametrisation* – 'in order to uncover marginalised and unique frames of signification'.[21]

I want to imagine a videographic pataphysics, then, as an 'inutilious' and sensual immersion in the particular, a practice in which a ludic but distributed subjectivity is enjoyed 'over supposed analytical objectivity'.[22] I envisage the set of constraints that condition a given encounter between the cyborg scholar and our objects of analysis as a hyperbolising of rational procedure to a point of absurdity in which the rational comes to parody itself.[23]

An erotics of constraint

Videographic criticism grows out of film studies – indeed, out of *cinephilia*[24] – and we tend to speak of parametric rather than constraint-based procedures (the latter is characteristic of design theory as well as literary criticism) because that is the terminology inherited from classic discussions of style-centred cinema in Noël Burch and David Bordwell.[25] In his influential discussion of 'parametric narration', Bordwell analyses certain films in terms of how style is generated, not in the service of the plot, but 'according to distinct principles, just as a narrative poem exhibits prosodic patterning or an operatic scene fulfils a musical logic'.[26] Bordwell deals with fictional film, but elements of his account are relevant for a parametric videographic scholarship, especially his description of the thematic concerns of parametric cinema as 'strikingly obvious', even banal. Instead of thematic depth, says

Bordwell, films built according to parametric systems offer 'a richness of texture that resists interpretation'.[27] What would Bordwell's observation mean if applied to a videographic scholarship built with parametric means? What would a scholarship be that was rich in texture but uninterested in interpretation?

I propose, below, Catherine Grant's video essay *Dissolves of Passion* as a particular but exemplary answer to that question. I can suggest an answer in more general terms by borrowing, as Bordwell does, art historian E. H. Gombrich's distinction between the *sense of meaning* and the *sense of order* in our perception of visual art. For Gombrich, the former is associated with representational art while the latter is associated with decorative or abstract art and is concerned with the identification of pattern and the activity of inferring the principles that generate it.[28] For Bordwell, the sense of order presides in parametric cinema, and the same is true, I argue, in parametric scholarship. As Stephen Ramsay writes, algorithmic criticism 'seeks not facts, but patterns'.[29] But if Ramsay is describing what is *accessed* by a parametric criticism, its analytical content, I am speaking also of the *form* that such criticism takes.

Let me propose then that a videographic parametric scholarship deals in texture, pattern, and world-building rather than explanation, meaning, and argument, and illustrate this with Catherine Grant's *Dissolves of Passion*. Grant's video essay, which she has reflected upon in an important article,[30] fashions a meditation on the affective power of *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) by distilling the film to its 64 cross dissolves, presented sequentially in slow motion under a midnight blue filter, with accompanying audio retained in reverberating slow motion, and with extracts from a Rachmaninoff concerto (the same used in the feature film) superimposed on the whole.

Though Grant herself – for reasons I will speculate about below – describes this as a 'secondary function' of *Dissolves of Passion*, the video essay transcribes Grant's own ('and quite probably others') intense engagement with *Brief Encounter* as 'retrospectatorship', a mode of viewing 'shaped by the experiences, fantasies and memories it elicits in the spectator'.[31] Grant herself does not use this terminology, but I see this poetics of retrospectatorship as a queer cinephilia, a form of 'too-close reading' akin to that proposed by D.A. Miller in his fascinating, paradoxical book *Hidden Hitchcock* (Grant mentions Miller's work on Hitchcock's *Rope* earlier in her article).[32] For me, the practice of this queer cinephilia is to be valued in itself and exceeds any declarative statements that may, for example, be extracted from *Dissolves of Passion* about the character of the dissolves in *Brief Encounter* or in cinema as such. Grant insists on the propositional knowledge offered by her video essay, and this is not to be doubted, but any verbal 'take aways' from *Dissolves of Passion* seem less compelling than the texture and experience of the video essay itself.

In her writing, Grant draws on Susan Sontag to describe her approach to videographic scholarship not as a hermeneutics but as an erotics in which the scholar has a sensuous engagement with the objects studied. Grant talks of an 'active handling', a 'gestural use of editing', and of how the use of non-linear editing software creates a 'sensation of [virtually] "touching the film object" as a digital, or digitised, artefact […]'. [33]She draws on Barbara Bolt to describe her videographic practice 'as a form of understanding with the hands and eyes, which "operates in a different register from the representational paradigm of man-as-subject in relation to objects"'.[34] This is *material thinking*, which involves, again in the words of Bolt, 'a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice'.[35] Material thinking is a form of critical *intimacy* rather than critical *distance*, the performative practice of which has to do with *intervening*, with making something happen, rather than *representing*, which implies separation from the object analysed.[36]

I would describe this critical intimacy as a *cyborg* erotics where the action of the 'hands and eyes' is one with the affordances of the editing interface. As Haraway writes:

> Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshiped and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.[37]

Moreover, by making performative interventions rather than representations, a cyborg erotics is less concerned with the elucidation of existing objects than with the creation of new ones. This videographic pataphysics aspires to be sufficient in itself, and treats as incidental any empirical findings about its 'source' texts. As such, OuScholPo names an inutilious, unnecessary, *luxury* scholarship, in which knowledge is a kind of excess – both waste product and wastefully deployed.

Capta-base thinking

Dissolves of Passion is an example of a supercut, a montage that compiles an extensive or exhaustive collection of a particular element or phenomenon (in this case, all the dissolves in *Brief Encounter*). The supercut obeys an algorithmic logic in which the given element is identified, extracted, and combined with similar instances, and it is something of a prime exhibit for the discussion of a parametric videographic scholarship because it is a form quintessentially associated with fans and simultaneously with computerised automation.[38] So suggests Allison de Fren who, in a recent article published in the special issue of *The Cine-Files* devoted to the 'scholarly video essay', sets out an approach to the supercut that can differentiate itself as genuinely scholarly. De Fren's approach is essentially to deploy supercut procedures as the evidence collection stage in the analysis of a media text or critical theme, while also using them as a means of material thinking as the work proceeds; however, for de Fren, a final video essay must shape this evidence in a rhetorical structure of voiceover framing, audiovisual illustration, and argument.

De Fren recognises that 'the combination of audiovisual exploration and traditional scholarly inquiry has the potential of taking the scholar-practitioner where neither activity, by itself, would lead'.[39] But she resists taking the further step I wish to here, of imagining an algorithmic scholarship in terms of a posthuman, distributed subjectivity. Instead, she expressly wishes to recuperate videographic criticism to received scholarly modes and states her dissatisfaction with videographic practice 'in which interpretation is left open' to the addressee. Consequently, she takes as self-evident the value of 'knowledge production and the articulation of an original point of view or argument'.[40]

I return below to the question of 'knowledge production', but for now I want to problematise the insistence on argumentative form. I do so from the

perspective of what I see as an already existing as well as desirable distribution of critical agency beyond the (individual) human scholar. A conventional anthropocentrism refuses to countenance this distribution in de Fren's model. As Stacy Alaimo has written, 'agency is usually considered within the province of rational – and thus exclusively human – deliberation';[41] to recognise that critical agency may be distributed beyond human deliberation is to accept that a cyborg scholar's 'original point of view' may take non-intentional, a-rational and so non-argumentative forms. The explanatory or argumentative video essay, however rhetorically refined, cannot speak the posthuman story.

In her article, de Fren cites Lev Manovich's ideas about 'database logic' to argue that 'the kind of algorithmic cataloguing of analogous relations found in the supercut' expresses a pervasive mode of ordering information and experience in the digital age.[42] She quotes Manovich: '[if] the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database'.[43] For Manovich, database thinking expresses itself in lists, iterative structures, and (potentially infinite) series, and it represents an alternative form of ordering to narrative, which is concerned with motivation, cause and effect, and with beginnings and endings.

I have just now considered de Fren's conviction that 'database-structured outputs' like the supercut need to be shaped by interpretation and argument (the essayist's equivalent of narrative) in order to qualify as scholarship.[44] I want here to take a step back and to consider the implications of treating the media objects we analyse as datasets or, in Jason Mittell's phrase (also quoted by de Fren) as 'an archive of sounds and moving images'.[45]

Digital humanist Johanna Drucker has argued that 'data' is a misnomer which naturalises a naively or disingenuously 'realist' conception of phenomena as observer-independent. Drucker points out that the term 'data' (from the Latin *datum*, 'that which is given') conceals the extent to which the ordering of information is always a function of interpretative decisions.[46] As an alternative, she proposes 'capta' (from 'capture') to express the idea of information '"taken" actively' and 'constituted relationally, between observer and observed phenomena'.[47] To think of a film text or series of clips on the editing timeline as a 'capta-base' is to acknowledge the critical decisions that have placed or combined them there. In this respect, it is an ethical as well as a methodological decision to foreground or to disguise the formative interventions that constitute the 'archive of sounds and moving images' from

which a video essay is made. Or so, at least, Drucker would insist, based on the case she sets out for 'humanistic' forms of visualisation that foreground constructed-ness, ambiguity, and uncertainty and use these as structuring principles.[48] My own case is for a 'post-humanistic' videographic criticism that foregrounds the arbitrariness and contingency of its capta-base by making the parametric system intrinsic to its poetics of selection and making.

Event management

Drucker emphasises the performative dimension of capta visualisation, giving the classic examples of clocks and maps, visualisations of arbitrary divisions of time and space that materially dictate our experience of the world.[49] Kyle Parry has developed this point by offering a performative and posthumanist account of visualisation as 'enactment'. He speaks of 'visual representations – whether drawings, photographs, or data visualisation', to which we may add video essays, not in terms of fidelity to 'what is', but (and here he quotes Karen Barad) as 'productive evocations, provocations, and generative material articulations or reconfigurings of what is and what is possible'.[50]

To think of videographic scholarship as enactment is to place less emphasis on the act of interpretation than on the performative dimension. This enactment might assert a particular affective investment (queer cinephilia, say) as meriting the dignity of record, or, to take another example, might proffer a video essay as an imposing enough 'event' to constitute a challenge to other practitioners to dare to outdo the achievement. Enactment asserts argument as secondary to function; as Parry writes:

> enactment can become a defining commitment: practitioners can explicitly conceive of their undertakings as, in a fundamental sense, events of enactment. In such cases, as much as practitioners would aim to variously discover, say, show, or make available, they would also aim to variously intervene, effect, put into practice, reproduce, or provoke.[51]

Parry's use of the word commitment recalls again the ethical aspect of an enactment drawing from the capta-base. The passage from Lev Manovich quoted by de Fren, above, continues in the original as follows: 'it is also appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of [the] database'.[52] The practice of a parametric videographic criticism serves this necessary project by adopting Drucker's challenge to the idea of data and

by foregrounding the arbitrary (even violent) character of the digital capta-base that it activates.

The role of the human dimension of the cyborg scholar in all this remains at issue of course. In Allison de Fren's account, the individual's role is to extract an argument from the given evidence of the database; in my own, the activity of enactment requires an event manager who collaborates with the parametric system to shape the capta-base as a provocation for the addressee. Thinking of a parametric videographic practice as enactment is to be indifferent to the generation of constative, *factual* statements about texts or phenomena understood to pre-exist the action of analysis. The knowledge fashioned with a videographic erotics is procedural rather than propositional: what the practice offers to 'know' are the mechanics and steps of its own making. Offering material record of these mechanics and steps, the video essay proposes to its cyborg maker and their scholarly peers, not 'what do we now know?', but 'what must be made with this next?'.
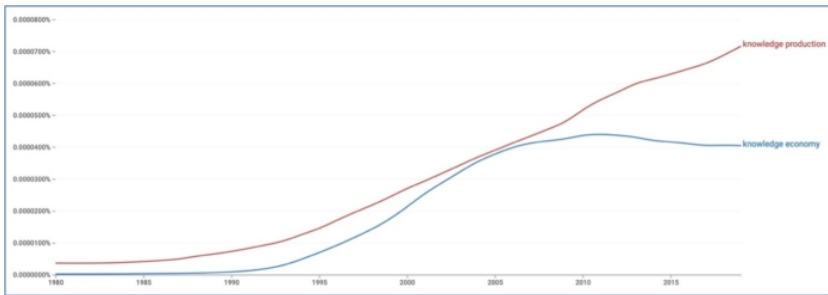
Knowledge piecework

Fig. 1: Google Ngram graph showing frequency of bigrams 'knowledge production' and 'knowledge economy' in the English corpus, 1980-2019.

Produce knowledge! This injunction traces the horizon of our historical moment in the academy, and 'knowledge production' is a phrase that has become pervasive only in the past few decades, as shown in the Google Ngram graph above.[53] Of course, given the foregoing discussion about problems with the idea of 'data', the visualisation offered in this Ngram chart should not be taken at face value. In fact, it is well known that the Google corpus skews heavily towards scientific literature: so what we may be accessing in the chart above is not evidence of the imposition from outside the academy of an economistic model of the atomisation and commodification of

knowledge, but evidence rather of an encroaching consensus among academics themselves concerning the nature of their work and identity.

I see the spread of this consensus as an evolutionary adaptation: in a context where the public funding of universities is under attack and in which humanities disciplines especially are increasingly seen as an extravagance that society can ill afford, to speak of your activity as 'knowledge production' is perhaps to increase the likelihood of your institutional or sectoral survival. Over time, the lexical adaptation will have successfully reproduced itself, until it expedites a kind of speciation. The new 'species', the scholar as 'knowledge worker', comes to dominate in a 'knowledge economy' (or 'marketplace of ideas') in which arguments are the commodity. New academic generations emerge who cannot be recognised (cannot recognise themselves) as scholars unless they articulate themselves and their practice in terms of knowledge production.

If knowledge production names the ideology within which the scholar-subject is interpellated, its state apparatuses take different forms. The tenure process in North America is one such apparatus. Another is the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in Britain, the national exercise run every seven or eight years to assess each university's research as a factor of individual scholar 'outputs'. An output is the unit of publication, most often a peer-reviewed article, sometimes a monograph and potentially (though still unusually) a video essay, or even a 'video monograph'.

Video monograph is the phrase used by Ian Garwood to describe his *Indy Vinyl* work, and his discussion in this journal of the dispersed form that project has come to assume is explicitly related to the need to evidence 'new knowledge' and to articulate the *Indy Vinyl* project's 'weightiness' in REF terms.[54] One infers a similar felt need in Catherine Grant's writings about her own videographic practice, in which Grant will typically insist on a given work's 'production of new knowledge'.[55] My point is not to criticise these exceptional practitioner-scholars, but rather to suggest how the reflex lexicon of knowledge production reclaims the epistemic challenge of their work for something more drably utilitarian. The authentic *inutiliousness* of their work is there precisely in the *triviality* of their concerns. (Please note, I mean these italicised nouns as positive descriptors.)

Take the guiding 'content' research question of Garwood's *Indy Vinyl* project, 'how has the recurring depiction of vinyl contributed to American Independent Cinema's identity as a distinctive film movement?'[56]: this question can only seem a McGuffin when considered in the light of the excessive

means used to answer it. The ostentatious virtuosity of the screen design and editing in a supercut like *Records in American Independent Cinema: 1987-2018* points to an investment in formal, sensual, and completist means that reveals by contrast the relative slightness of the content ends.[57] Likewise, the intensity of the cinephile distillation performed by Catherine Grant on *Brief Encounter* in her *Dissolves of Passion* seems markedly surplus if expressed in a conventional epistemics of take-away facts about David Lean's editing strategies or the *dasein* of dissolves.

Posthuman potlatch

To offer some account of the surplus and excess that I relish in work by Garwood and Grant, I will begin by noting a development parallel to the growth of the idea and ideology of knowledge production in the academy. I mean the way that the posthuman analysis of society and science – essential to my thinking here – has increasingly had recourse to concepts of productivity.

As Rebecca Herzig has demonstrated, an 'inexorable logic of production' permeates some of the most sophisticated recent accounts of the social and scientific realms (see, for example, the quote from Karen Barad, above).[58] As a historian of science, Herzig can object that this ignores the 'hegemonic irrationalities' that have often structured scientific activity – the tenacity of practices that tend to exclude women, for example – and this moves her to imagine the following project (for our purposes, I have replaced the word 'science' with 'videographic scholarship' in the quoted questions):[59]

[W]hat would an account of [videographic scholarship] look like which did not presume the productivity of action, which was not averse to the prospect of unproductive activity? Can we apprehend agency without presuming the ultimate productiveness of activity? Can we imagine an account of [videographic scholarship] that took squander seriously?

Herzig is imagining here an account that would better grasp (and critique) the irrational dimensions of scientific practice. For videographic scholarship, I want to make such irrationalities programmatic and reflexive, and I follow Herzig in finding a model in the work of Georges Bataille.

For Bataille the key mover of human society was not production but consumption, and its key problem was the disposal of surplus energy and resources, which for him occurred through orgiastic or destructive rituals like feasting or war. As Herzig notes, Bataille gestures to a 'materialist understanding of expenditure' when he explores how evolving socio-economic conditions articulate with the particular forms taken by conspicuous dissipation.[60]

Accordingly, I want to ask, what is the form to be taken by a non-productive videographic scholarship in this historical moment? My answer: posthuman potlatch. The OED defines potlatch as an opulent ceremonial feast, practiced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of America, at which possessions are given away or destroyed to display wealth or enhance prestige.[61] It refers to a kind of ruinous hospitality in which even rare and precious items may be sacrificed to assert the status of the host. Bataille writes that potlatch is a means of circulating wealth:

> More often than not it is the solemn giving of considerable riches, offered by a chief to his rival for the purpose of humiliating, challenging and obligating him. The recipient has to erase the humiliation and take up the challenge; he must satisfy the *obligation* that was contracted by accepting. He can only reply, a short time later, by means of a new potlatch, more generous than the first: he must pay back with interest.[62] [Bataille's italics]

As Herzig observes, 'Bataille gives the potlatch fundamental paternity: immoderate squander is the real impetus of social activity';[63] and if of *social*, why not of *academic* activity – of scholarship? Imagine a potlatch in which stocks of knowledge were the riches put to waste in the attempt by the scholar to goad the rival (the *discipline*) to even greater acts of squander. I am thinking the excess of Garwood's *Indy Vinyl* and Grant's *Dissolves of Passion* in precisely these terms. Such work is an invitation and a challenge to other creator-scholars to imitate and to outdo, if they can, the profligate expenditure.

This scholarly potlatch emerges from our historical moment for at least three reasons. First, because the stock of knowledge itself is so high, due to the frenetic investment in its production in the contemporary university. Second, because the young practice of videographic criticism has yet to find a universally accepted form: there are those who wish it to conform to 'normal science' by incorporating 'the traits and rhetoric of a traditionally text-based scholarly work',[64] and there are those, sensing paradigm shift, who enjoin us to embrace 'the idea that we are creating ontologically new scholarly forms';[65] the authority to dictate what form videographic criticism *should* take must be established in terms of scholarly prestige, itself contingent on disposing of 'knowledge to spare' (this is the enactive dimension of Garwood's and Grant's writings about their own work, as of de Fren's). Third, because the novelty of videographic practice in the academy implies that a society of practitioners is yet to be built: scholars need peers, and the radical hospitality of a scholarly potlatch is a performative act, beyond both altruism and self-interest, of creating one's rivals and therefore oneself.

This scholarly potlatch is 'posthuman' for two reasons. First, it refuses the idea of the 'centralised mechanism of consciousness that has been the foundation of liberal humanism', in that the individual (scholar) emerges only in relation with others.[66] I am thinking of scholarly exchange here in terms of Marcel Mauss' work on the reciprocal obligations instituted by gift-giving, which influenced Bataille and where he first read of the practice of potlatch. As Herzig writes, Mauss' work 'troubles the notion of autonomous selfhood' that grounds liberal humanism:[67]

> Supplanting ahistorical understandings of the free individual with a fundamentally social sense of personhood, Mauss emphasises the obligations attendant on all actors, whose norms of conduct fluctuate with changing modes of production.[68]

Applied to scholarly practice, Mauss' description of the obligations of the gift economy, radicalised in Bataille's account of potlatch, makes untenable the idea of the 'autonomous, voluntary self' of the scholar wilfully 'speaking'.[69] Instead, it is the practice of scholarly potlatch itself that speaks: the scholar does not precede the practice but emerges only through it (the argument makes the scholar, one might say, not vice versa). The second reason that this scholarly potlatch is posthuman is, of course, that the scholar that thereby emerges assumes the form of a cyborg managing the videographic event.

I risk my own surplus of abstraction here, so I will provide one more concrete example by way of illustration. Matt Payne's witty *Who Ever Heard...?* is

another instance of too-close reading, a video essay constructed around six-
teen looped two-second chunks from a scene in *The Man Who Shot Liberty
Valence* (John Ford, 1962), each distributed across a nine-screen grid with spe-
cial attention paid to the rhythmic superimposition of dialogue and other
diegetic sound.

Precisely because of its absurdist tone, *Who Ever Heard...?* succeeds in achiev-
ing its creator's stated goal '[of drawing] attention to genre repetition vis-à-
vis editing repetition', and of highlighting 'the kind of symbolic work that
genres perform'.[70] The video essay might well be used in a pedagogical
context to stimulate discussion about just such symbolic work. But for me the
work's true interest lies elsewhere: in the foregrounded collaboration of par-
ametric system and organic creator-curator, and in the teasing challenge it
extends to other cyborg scholars.

I can invoke Payne's video essay to exemplify a workshop of potential
videographic scholarship because, just as the writers of OuLiPo tried to in-
vent new literary forms and to develop generative structures to *enable* writing,
Who Ever Heard...? proposes itself as a form to be adopted by other video-
graphic practitioners.[71] Something about the insouciant tone of *Who Ever
Heard...?* combined with its ostentatious (again, excessive) formal playfulness
lends itself to understanding in terms of what Bataille called the 'gift of ri-
valry'.[72] The video essay addresses itself to the society of videographic
practice and says: take this form and see *if* you can make with it, satisfying
the constraints it imposes; see *what* can be made with it, allowing yourself to
be surprised by the content it generates; and see what you can make *of* it,
allowing the form itself to evolve and be refined.

The video essay's contribution cannot, then, be limited to its commentary, however effective, on genre codes in the Western or on masculinity in dominant cinema; it extends to its character of enactment, the challenge to other practitioners to engage in an agonistic activity of further play.

Scholarship, still

Let me be clear: I am talking here about an elitist practice. Elitist, first, in the sense that I am describing a practice of the highest ambition, even if the process of recognising the quality of a given work is a 'popular' one, to be measured by the response to the challenge of the work by the society of videographic practitioners. (It goes without saying that a practice of videographic potlatch will be open-access.) Elitist also in the sense that I am describing a practice proper to those with the institutional security to test by transgression the received modes of scholarly enquiry. It is precisely those of us with the privilege of permanent or tenured academic posts who have the *duty* to experiment, to push the boundaries and the potential of a form that is still new, and who have the ethical obligation to engage in forging a society of interlocutors and peers.

And let me repeat that even as I speak of transgression, I am still talking about scholarly enquiry. I am talking about a practice that defines itself *qua scholarship* (even if part of a pataphysical tradition that straddles both art and science) because to do so is to activate and to trouble certain assumptions about the ethics, purpose, and epistemologies of the work so defined. To speak of an 'inutilious scholarship' is to embrace oxymoron and gleefully to confirm laments about the 'opacity, triviality and irrelevance' of much humanities research.[73] It is to question and protest the pervasive notion of scholarship as 'knowledge production'. (OuScholPo is a protest form.)

If scholarship is defined by its relation to knowledge, then a workshop of potential scholarship elicits and participates in an untranslatable form of absurdist knowledge. OuScholPo engages in activities of knowing inarticulable in propositional terms and inaccessible to conventional schemas. As a pataphysics, it wishes to describe 'the universe supplementary to this one', a universe of phenomena perceivable only from a cyborg perspective. And so, by way of conclusion, another cyborg manifesto...

Workshop of Potential Scholarship (10×50)

1.

My title alludes to OuLiPo, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Literature), founded to explore constraint-based approaches to writing. OuLiPo proposed the acronym Ou-X-Po to envisage possible fields (designated by 'X') that might themselves adopt parametric procedures. I have in mind a videographic OuScholPo.

2.

A director of the NEH notoriously dismissed the contemporary humanities as opaque, trivial, and irrelevant: for a workshop of potential scholarship this would be no insult. OuScholPo names a creative erotics of videographic practice, a pataphysics that is playful and wilfully banal, experimental and performative but non-productive, even wasteful.

3.

An erotics, unlike a hermeneutics, implies a sensuous engagement with the phenomena studied, a practice Catherine Grant teaches us to recognise as material thinking. It has to do not with representing but with intervening. A scholarly poetics of making: of remix, mash-up, and manipulation; not primarily interpretation or explanation.

4.

Sensuous engagement also with the *tools* of study, where subjectivity and agency are distributed along the editing platform and algorithmic action of generative constraints. 'Formal parameters lead to content discoveries', write Keathley and Mittell, but more essential to parametric scholarship is the dissolution of the authority of the scholar-human.

5.

Bordwell said of parametric style that its themes are banal. Likewise, any insights achieved by parametric scholarship are candidly trivial, at least if stated as propositional knowledge. OuScholPo offers an experience, an immersion, sometimes an alienation: it dwells in texture and world-building and is uninterested in generalisable 'take aways'.

6.

'World-building' also in the sense that a videographic erotics fashions its source (films, television, videogames, etc.) in the act of scholarly intervention. OuScholPo does not deal in 'data' – facts or information treated as *given*; it creates (with) 'capta' – phenomena *captured* by material thinking. It enacts (not extracts) the phenomena analysed.

7.

The scholarly poetics of OuScholPo are performative. This is the only sense in which it 'produces' knowledge. The knowledge fashioned through a videographic erotics is procedural and creative rather than propositional: it suggests not 'Given this, what do we now know?', but 'Having made this, what can we do next?'

8.

OuScholPo protests the indenture of the Humanities to the idol of utility. Understand it not as knowledge production but potlatch, a practice in which precious resources are expended for pleasure or to challenge another (another human-scholar-algorithm) to outdo the act of waste in a further expenditure of creativity.

9.

Three examples to show what I mean: *Dissolves of Passion* (Grant), extracts from *Indy Vinyl* (Garwood), *Who Ever Heard...?* (Payne). These works share a parametric approach to form and to the selection of elements. Each performs rather than reports analysis: acts of immanent criticism that are immersive rather than explanatory.

10.

Imagine a gerundive scholarship – a 'knowing-doing' – that goes beyond knowing-*how* to knowing-*with*. Or perhaps an *un*knowing: a scholarship that makes *non*-sense of things. OuScholPo is absurdist in method and (typically) outcome because it expresses a distributed subjectivity. It opens prospects inaccessible to the merely human scholar.

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Notes

[1]   Terry 2019, p. xxviii-xxx.

[2]   The acronym is clumsily macaronic because there is no conveniently similar French word for scholarship. 'Érudition' may be the closest in meaning, but even there its strongest denotation does not refer to research or academic study.

[3]   Keathley 2011.

[4]   See for example van den Berg & Kiss 2016. Garwood 2020 contains a useful reflection on the controversy.

[5]   I take the term 'self-imposed constraints' from Mose Biskjær & Halskov 2014, for whom it refers to deliberate restrictions on one's creative choices in a design context. It is distinguished from the 'intrinsic constraints' given by the material and equipment such as editing software, externally 'imposed constraints' to do with factors like budget, required scale (or length), time available to undertake and complete a project etc., and 'invisible constraints', that is, assumptions that may be unconscious (and may be mistaken) about what a project requires.

[6]   Garwood 2020; de Fren 2020.

[7]   Keathley & Mittell 2019. Middlebury tutor Jason Mittell has himself led investigations into exper-imental algorithmic and 'deformative' techniques of videographic analysis which are particularly important for my thinking here (as for my own videographic practice) because they represent something of a *ne plus ultra* of parametric procedure. See Mittell 2019 and 2021.

[8]   See https://thevideoessay.com/exercises (accessed 2 March 2021).

[9]   Caputo 1996, p. 25.

[10]   See the special issue of *The Cine-Files* (2020) edited by de Fren & Cox-Stanton.

[11]   Wolfe 2010, p. xv.

[12]   Keathley & Mittell 2019.

[13]   Haraway 2004, p. 8.

[14]   Ramsay 2011, pp. xi, 20.

[15]   Jarry 1996, p. 21. Jarry biographer Jill Fell (2010, p. 135) explains what Jarry may have meant with the phrase 'universe supplementary to this one' by pointing to the time in which pataphysics was imagined, when the discovery of forms of light like x-ray and infra-red, invisible to the human eye, suggested that a further range of imperceptible phenomena might surround us. See Hugill 2012 for a discussion of the various definitions and descriptions of pataphysics by Jarry and his successors.

[16]   Hugill 2012, p. 1.

[17]   Dickinson 2014, p. 133.

[18]   Ramsay 2011, p. 21.

[19]   Hugill 2012, p. 5.

[20]   Ramsay 2011, p. 31.

[21]   Dickinson 2014, p. 133.

[22]   Hugill 2012, p. 35.

[23]   I am adapting here ideas from Bök 2002, pp. 3-5.

[24]   Keathley 2011.

[25]   Burch 1973; Bordwell 1985.

[26]   Bordwell 1985, p. 281.

[27]   Ibid., p. 289.

[28]   Ibid.

[29]   Ramsay 2011, p. 17.

[30]   Grant 2019.

[31]   Ibid.

[32]   Miller 2017.

[33]   Grant 2014.

[34]   Ibid.

[35]   Ibid.

[36]   I am using the term 'performative' not in the colloquial or theatrical sense, but in the sense of utterances or actions designed to make something happen, or utterances that are themselves actions.

[37]   Haraway 2004, p. 38.

[38]   de Fren 2020.

[39]   Ibid.

[40]   Ibid.

[41]   Alaimo 2010, p. 143.

[42]   de Fren 2020.

[43]   Ibid.

[44]   Ibid.

[45]   Mittell 2019, p. 226.

[46]   Drucker 2011.

[47]   Ibid.

[48]   Drucker 2014, p. 125. Jason Mittell effectively talks of videographic criticism as data visualisation when he describes Kevin B. Lee's use of screen captures of his editing timeline in some of Lee's video essays. These screen captures show that Lee is treating his films as capta-sets, and their reproduction constitutes a visualisation of that capta. Mittell 2019, pp. 227-228. See Anderson 2020 for a thought-provoking discussion of videographic criticism and visualisation.

[49]   Drucker 2014, p. 74.

[50]   Parry 2019, p. 144.

[51]   Ibid., p. 149.

[52]   Manovich 1999, p. 81.

[53]   The phrase seems to have been introduced around 1960, possibly by Fritz Machlup in *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*, first published in 1962. See Holert 2020.

[54]   Garwood 2020. Garwood is perfectly self-aware regarding the character of his knowledge claims (and claims about knowledge), and his article's concluding section is especially rich with suggestions I try to follow in the remainder of the present piece.

[55] Grant 2019. See also Grant 2014, in which she writes: 'The more I allowed myself to respond freely to the material [...] the more new knowledge [...] I seemed to produce.'

[56] Garwood 2020.

[57] Another striking example of methodological surplus would be Eric Faden's *Visual Disturbances* (2019), in which the means seem impressively to exceed the argument about 'invisible cinema' Faden wishes to make.

[58] Herzig 2004, p. 135.

[59] Ibid., p. 140.

[60] Ibid.

[61] I acknowledge the risk of a crude appropriation in my use of the idea of potlatch. However, it is deployed not as a 'primitivism', but in the conviction that potlatch is a sophisticated, reflexive, and indeed *contemporary* means of social communication and ordering.

[62] Bataille 1997, p. 202.

[63] Herzig 2005, p. 40.

[64] From the section 'Aims' in van den Berg & Kiss 2016, at https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/aims?path=introduction-1 (accessed 2 March 2021).

[65] Grant 2014.

[66] Nayar 2014, p. 38.

[67] Herzig 2005, p. 39.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Payne 2020.

[71] I have made this point in a guest post for Will DiGravio's Video Essay Podcast newsletter (O'Leary 2020), and the challenge has been taken up by at least two practitioners: Ariel Avissar (https://vimeo.com/439747440) and Gal Nadler (https://vimeo.com/444510452). Ian Garwood has written to me to say that he himself issued an invitation (via Twitter) to fellow practitioners to rework one of his own video essays.

[72] Bataille 1997.

[73] This is the remarkable complaint made of humanities research by Bruce Cole (2016), who headed the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH), the body in the United States that grants funds for research projects and training, during the two presidencies of George W. Bush.