

Videographic scene analyses, part 2

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As guest editor, my focus for the audiovisual essay section of the Spring and Autumn 2018 issues of NECSUS is original *scene analyses* as examples of *autonomous* and *explanatorily argumentative* videographic criticism. I aimed to inspire the making of videographic works that provide ‘straightforward close analyses of specific scenes of movies – [...] focused, analytical, exploratory, and explanatory analyses that take advantage of the novel affordances of the audiovisual medium to clearly present, prove, and argue for their observations on a particular – perhaps key – moment of a film’. In this second part of the introduction, I delve into the components of my curating idea that have proven to be more problematic in providing clear guidelines to the invited contributors. These are the requirements of producing ‘autonomous’ and ‘scholarly’ videos.

1) In part 1 (Spring 2018), I described the autonomous criterion as one option through which one can call video essays ‘truly audiovisual audiovisual works’; only by functioning (‘present, prove, and argue’) independently – standalone and self-contained – without any written supplement, can videography aspire to be a (relatively) novel form of scholarly communication.[1] In line with this directive, I deliberately did not ask for any textual support to the videos presented in the sections I guest edited.

Commonly, accompanying essays are supplements to the audio-visuals, providing textual context by, for example, giving background insight into their production history or methodology (as often happens in NECSUS), or by revealing their explanatory line of reasoning in the write-up (the ‘prove’ and ‘argue’ bits). The former option can function as a truly enriching practice of enhancing information, in some brilliant cases even integrating production history or methodology into the video itself (for example Kevin B. Lee’s desktop videos combine findings and the ways these findings emerge – [see](#), for instance, how he *uses* video editing software *and* also *shows* how that helps to decipher the tricky narrative of Hong Sang-soo’s *The Day He Arrives*). The latter option, outsourcing argumentation to accompanying writing, however, often seems to indicate a lack of trust in the videographic format. In these cases, written accompaniments do not *con*-textualise but often rather *re*-textualise the audiovisual works, rendering their status back to that of an augmented version of a traditional text-illustration. I suppose, as practicing film and media scholars, we are trained and habitualised in justifying (even) our audiovisual scholarship by written words. Curating the present issue, my idea was to challenge makers to leave this well-practiced skill behind for a change and trust their standalone audiovisual communication instead.

2) What has proven to be more difficult to delineate, and the criterion about which I was the least straightforward in part 1, is the description of the desired ‘scholarly’ aspect of the presented works. While in part 1, I (unconsciously) carefully hid the term in brackets, a weighty and potentially narrowing criterion like this begs the question how can we define a ‘scholarly sound academic video’ (thanks to Adrian Martin and Cristina Álvarez López for not letting me get away without answering this).

At first, I thought that I should forward this difficult but perfectly legitimate definitional request to those platforms – academic videographic journals, online journals’ audiovisual essay sections, or channels on video-sharing websites – that are dedicated to publish and host scholarly videos; after all, as

homes to such work, they must hold and maintain certain academic standards through their rigorous peer-reviewing processes or gatekeeping moderator systems. Also, I could have dismissed the problem by claiming that the question concerns a much larger issue of ‘valid’ scholarly utterance in the history of textual study of film and media, which the recent surge of audiovisual criticism makes visible. Fortunately, there is not a single set of criteria that guides academic writing about film and other audiovisual media. The diversity of videographic works and the recurring discussion concerning their scholarly legitimacy in fact only mirrors the diversity in our academic community concerning valid and (for our academic institutions’ tenure committees) valuable academic expressions.

Not using these escape routes, in our book on the ‘academic research video’, my co-author Thomas van den Berg and I were of the belief that there exist some criteria, or at least a tacit understanding within the videographic community, about some guiding aspects of scholarly audiovisual works. We set out to define ‘scholarly’ and ‘academic’ not as a question of affiliation (obviously, as most of the creators work without a degree in and/or connection to film and media studies programs), but as a specific *mode of communication*. We discerned some criteria for a scholarly-sound video from the established tradition of textual scholarship – this, however, given to the above-mentioned lack of clean-cut academic writing standards, necessarily limited our ambitions and caused us to arrive at some general ideas only. We posed questions like ‘What makes an *academic paper* academic?’ and ‘What are the general criteria of *academic writing*?’, and then weighed what answers could contribute to a videographic version of scholarly communication. Indeed, the relationship between text and video has to be that of a ‘contribution to’, not a full analogy; granted, one of the virtues of video is precisely the fact that it is not text, and it would seem unreasonable to treat it as such. We were certainly aware of the fact that videographic works are not necessarily garnered by mirroring the workings of old(er) media through mechanistic *remediation*. In his comment to my early attempt to define ‘The Audiovisual Research Essay as an Alternative to Text-Based Scholarship’ Adrian Martin raised similar suspicions, pondering that it might be that ‘the audiovisual essay form is not so suited to particular types of academic arguments that are highly conceptual/abstract/philosophical – and is better suited to (for want of a better word) “assertive” arguments that have more to do with showing (or, at least, suggesting) connections through “evidence.”’ Surely, one should never underes-

timate the audiovisual expression's greater *performative* capacity over the textual form, and its potential effect on the argument one is trying to make. Hence, mainly focusing on the medium-independent aspects of scholarly criteria, the book's main objective was to answer the question how the traits and rhetoric of a traditionally text-based scholarly work, characterised by 'traceability' of information and 'academic lucidity' of argumentation, can be optimally incorporated and streamlined into an autonomous audiovisual container.

Beyond providing easy solutions toward the requirement of 'traceability', such as 'the academic video often works with citations which need to be precise and connected to a clearly articulated bibliography', a bigger part of our book contemplated the possibility of achieving 'academic lucidity' through a certain 'scholarly mode of communication'. Building on Steven Pinker's cheeky take on 'Why Academics Stink at Writing', we envisioned academic writing and its videographic equivalent as 'a trade-off between the imprecise plain language, which is often low on cohesion and high on fluency, and the potentially obscuring "traditional" academic style, which is, in turn, commonly high on cohesion and low on expressive clarity and fluency'. In his early paper on 'The Visual Essay as Digital Publishing', Drew Morton (also a contributor to this very issue) makes this desired transition sound easy:

the artist needs to adapt his or her prose to the medium, away from academic prose and towards the aural friendly. That is not to say the academic visual essay avoids engaging in the theoretical; it simply engages in the theoretical in a more accessible and concise fashion.

We also made the (potentially not that popular) statement 'one must not forget that academic style is generally targeted at a critical audience that is informed at a certain degree of knowledge'. This, trying to reassure the reader immediately, was not meant to be an elitist remark, but an acknowledgement of a professional niche market, with its own depth of address and terminology, that academic works might want to communicate within.

Outweighing the academic context's *professional* audience and thereby dominating the discourse, according to Mark and Deborah Parker, the *general* public has a

distaste for any explanation or analysis that is abstract, comparative, or extended. [...] A fast trade in detail and anecdote among web-savvy, self-appointed critics leave little space for such criticism. [2]

Similarly, in his 2014 video on *What Makes the Video Essay Great?*, Kevin B. Lee contrasts academic videographic work with the ‘more casual video essays that you typically see, the ones that capture attention and go viral [and are] short, smart, and addictively watchable’. Even though the boundary between entertainment and academic audiovisual writing probably falls somewhere along these lines, it is not as simple as to blame web-savvy self-appointed critics (they often outperform affiliated academics) or to define scholarly videos as less attractive or less prone to virality. Surely, on the one hand, videographic scholarship should not be fully seduced by the *attractiveness* of expression, *style* should not trump *argumentation*, and viewing statistics and *social reward* should not mellow our field’s established and (more or less) agreed upon *scholarly standards*. However, this does not mean that videos with academic aspiration should not aim to be attractive, stylish, and ultimately being rewarded by the widest possible audience – assuming that the aesthetic appeal that comes with these intentions contributes to the videos’ argumentative success through more engaging and convincing communication, able to expand online viewers’ shorter attention spans and trigger/maintain their interest in the presented.

All in all, the ‘scholarly’ adjective is not meant to be general and rigid, a highbrow quality stamp, preferring one type of work while excluding others, but a marker of a specific and flexible discourse regulated by our academic community. Its relevance may be limited to reminding us to advocate a blend of established and fresh standards that both maintain and refine traditional academic values within our intensely changing context of dissemination. Being a teacher at a university and thereby constantly obliged to adjust to some explicit assessment criteria, I am sure I am not alone in having trouble finding that thin (if at all existent) line between ‘scholarly-valid’ and ‘scholarly-illegitimate’ modes of (audiovisual) expression. My parentheses around the word ‘scholarly’ in the introduction to part 1 might have been a sign of my insecurity concerning the struggle we are currently having when working on the academic acknowledgement of videographic criticism.

Please watch the videos in part 2 – Ian Garwood’s rich research and presentation on *The L/Song Take in “Before Sunrise”*, Drew Morton’s to-the-point textbook-quality analysis *Agent of Chaos: Discontinuous Editing in “The Dark Knight”*, Luís Azevedo’s smart take on an action-driven genre *Witnessing the Western*, and Greta Calaciura’s and Shant Bayramian’s (my students) cognitive treadmill of *Marxism in “Metropolis”* – and see whether they can live up

to this issue's *autonomous, explanatorily argumentative* (and *scholarly*) *scene analyses* criteria.

Author

Miklós Kiss is an Assistant Professor in Film and Media Studies at the University of Groningen (Netherlands). His research intersects the fields of narrative and cognitive film theories. His writing has been published in many anthologies and academic journals (*Projections, Scope, Senses of Cinema, New Cinemas*), and he is an editorial board member of *[in]Transition*, the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic film studies. His recent books are *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video* (co-authored with Thomas van den Berg; Scalar, 2016) and *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* (co-authored with Steven Willemsen; Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

Audiovisual Essayists

Ian Garwood is a Senior Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at University of Glasgow. His video essay work includes How Little We Know: An Essay Film about Hoagy Carmichael (edited by Ian Robertson) and The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism. He is a member of the editorial board of *[In]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*. The *S/Long Take in "Before Sunrise"* is part of a larger video essay/written word project on record-playing in American independent cinema.

Drew Morton is an Associate Professor of Mass Communication at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. His publications have appeared in *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Cinema Journal, [in]Transition, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *Studies in Comics*. He is the co-founder and co-editor of *[in]Transition*, the award-winning journal devoted to videographic criticism, and the author of the monograph *Panel to the Screen: Style, American Film, and Comic Books during the Blockbuster Era* (University Press of Mississippi, 2016). With Irina Trocan, he is currently working on a Scalar digital book project focused on the history, theory, and practice of videographic criticism.

Luís Azevedo is videomaker with a Master's degree in film from Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal. He has been regularly making video essays for *Fandor*, *Little White Lies*, and MUBI, with a total of over 60 pieces to his name. He was the recipient, along with kogonada, of the fake '2017 Chris Marker Legacy Award' for the most Markeresque video of the year.

Greta Calaciura graduated in Arts, Culture and Media at the University of Groningen (Netherlands). Her thesis research intersected the fields of visual arts and film studies through the study of optical devices, employed first by painters from the Renaissance and then at the origin of cinema. She has begun to explore the world of cinema, first through working for the Stockholm Feminist Film Festival and then at the LUX Film Prize in Brussels. In addition, she has recently begun to write film reviews in a personal blog.

Shant Bayramian is currently studying for his Master's degree in Film Studies at the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands). After completing his degree in Arts, Culture, and Media at the University of Groningen (The Netherlands) with a specialisation in film and music, he has effectively found his niche within film philosophy, postcolonial film theory, and diasporic cinema. He has also developed a keen interest in the video essay, which stems from his roots as a filmmaker and editor.

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Videography

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Notes

- [1] 'Relative novelty' refers to the acknowledgement but impossibility of fully crediting early film education on television (e.g. John Ellis and Mark Cousins for Channel 4 and BBC), cinematic essayists (e.g. Jean-Luc Godard or Chris Marker), video artists (e.g. Christian Marclay or Matthias Müller) or academics (e.g. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen), and other attempts at audiovisual experimentation with an educational character.
- [2] Parker & Parker 2011, p. 122.