

Kevin B. Lee; Ariel Avissar

## Desktop documentary as scholarly subjectivity: Five approaches

2023

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19737>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Lee, Kevin B.; Avissar, Ariel: Desktop documentary as scholarly subjectivity: Five approaches. In: *NECSUS\_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Ports, Jg. 12 (2023), Nr. 1, S. 276–280. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19737>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/desktop-documentary-as-scholarly-subjectivity-five-approaches/>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## Desktop documentary as scholarly subjectivity: Five approaches

Kevin B. Lee and Ariel Avissar

NECSUS 12 (1), Spring 2023: 276–280

URL: [https://mediarep.org/bitstream/handle/doc/20949/NECSUS\\_2023\\_1\\_586-596\\_Desktop-documentary\\_Lee-Avissar\\_.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y](https://mediarep.org/bitstream/handle/doc/20949/NECSUS_2023_1_586-596_Desktop-documentary_Lee-Avissar_.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y)

### Abstract

Desktop documentary has gained increasing prominence both within and beyond cinema and media scholarly practice. The recent ascendance of desktop filmmaking prompts an occasion to reflect on the current state of the practice. The five original desktop videos presented in this section offer such an occasion for reflection, particularly with regard to the distinguishing qualities and affordances of desktop documentary and desktop subjectivities for cinema and media scholarship.

### Keywords

audiovisual essay, desktop documentary, desktop subjectivity

Desktop documentary has gained increasing prominence both within and beyond cinema and media scholarly practice. This audiovisual recording method treats the computer screen 'as both a camera lens and a canvas, tapping into its potential as an artistic medium', thus seeking 'to both depict and question the ways we explore the world through the computer screen'.<sup>[1]</sup> Miklós Kiss traces its roots in screen recording and screencasting practices such as gameplay recordings and software tutorials, and describes its proliferation throughout the second half of the 2010s with examples springing from multiple contexts in narrative film and video art.<sup>[2]</sup>

While academic writing on desktop documentary has appeared as early as 2016,<sup>[3]</sup> the form itself appeared in academic publishing as early as 2012,<sup>[4]</sup> and the first instance of a peer-reviewed desktop documentary was in 2019.<sup>[5]</sup> As Kiss and Tuna Tetik have discussed, the intensified online living and working conditions imposed by the pandemic brought new relevance to the format.<sup>[6]</sup> The recent ascendance of desktop filmmaking prompts an occasion to reflect on the current state of the practice. The five original desktop videos

presented in this issue offer such an occasion for reflection, particularly with regard to the distinguishing qualities and affordances of desktop documentary for cinema and media studies.

In 'Desktop Documentary', Johannes Binotto explores the desktop as a metaphor for scholarly cognition by comparing analog and digital desktops. In 'With Camera in Hand, I was Alive', Katie Bird weighs the possibility of desktop filmmaking to access the sensations of using a physical camera. In 'Double Exposures', Brunella Tedesco-Barlocco uses editing software to engage with serial spectatorial memory as provoked by two movie sequels of television series. In 'Indians from 1967: A Reaction', Ritika Kaushik examines the digital afterlives of a 1960s Indian documentary that has been re-edited for viral online distribution. Finally, in 'Some Thoughts Occasioned by Four Desktops', Ariel Avissar responds, in desktop documentary form, to the previous four videos in this section, reflecting in turn on each of their unique approaches to desktop scholarship.

While these videos make their debut in this issue, their origins can be traced to a loose network of sites that chart the emergence of a desktop videographic practice within academia over the past few years. Bird's video was made for a 2021 SCMS desktop documentary seminar that we organised with Evelyn Kreuzer. Kaushik was another participant in that seminar, where she made her first desktop video that, similar to her contribution in this issue, displayed a particular sensitivity to the global and transcultural dimensions of internet culture. In 2022, Binotto presented an earlier version of his video at the 'Desktop as Medium' workshop we organised along with him and Kreuzer for the NECS conference, and Tedesco-Barlocco developed her video as part of a mentorship program at the 'Videography: Art and Academia' conference organised at Hannover, under the mentorship of Jason Mittell.[7] Taken together, these events can be regarded as a network for academic videographic production, perhaps comparable to the production and development labs that one finds in the international film festival circuit.

Existing scholarship on desktop cinema bears a recurring interest in what Kevin B. Lee and Chloé Galibert-Lainé have called 'desktop subjectivity': the unique form of first-person perspective that results from linking the spectator's gaze with the author's desktop.[8] As Kiss has argued, there are many different modes of desktop subjectivity, achieved by mobilising such qualities as 'transparency', 'credibility', 'effortlessness', and 'performativity' native to desktop-based interactions and their presumably direct presentation of the author's screen to the viewer.[9] The videos included in this section demonstrate a range of authorial strategies and gestures that suggest diverse ways of constructing and virtually embodying desktop subjectivities. In Binotto's video, his offscreen narration is accompanied by the onscreen gesticulations of his hands, which direct and distract the audience's gaze throughout the video's staged performance, not unlike a magician's stagecraft. In Bird's video, the gestures of literal hands are replaced by the traces of invisible handiwork, with

various onscreen operations illustrating what ‘desktop hands’ can do: typing, clicking, opening, dragging, resizing or closing windows. Tedesco-Barlocco’s video employs gestures of recollection and re-viewing, the desktop screen functioning as a digital surrogate for subjective processes of memory and recall. Kaushik’s video highlights the desktop form’s potential for intersubjective, second-person address, augmented by the inclusion of Kaushik’s own face as she reacts to the online materials she engages with. Finally, Avissar’s response video explores the possibility of critical dialogue between desktops, as his desktop responds to each of the others. Identifying distinct authorial gestures in each video, he adopts them as models for his own video while reflecting upon their qualities and affordances for producing desktop subjectivity.[10]

Given desktop documentary’s rich repertoire of videographic gestures for narrating and presenting the act of digital scholarship, the format may be regarded as an exemplary site for viewing and reflecting upon the labor of producing thought, as well as the conventions and crises of contemporary academic labor. These concerns became evident when it came to asking the authors to provide statements to introduce their videos, as has been established practice in videographic journals such as *NECSUS* and *[in]Transition*. [11] Ultimately, each author arrived at their own position on the matter. Binotto, Tedesco-Barlocco, and Avissar submitted author statements that provide additional contextual information to make their videos more legible to text-centric scholarly practices. While most chose to contextualise their videos using written statements, the contents and lengths of these statements varies significantly, which raises questions about the extent to which these types of videos might function as standalone pieces, following Kiss’ expressed wish for ‘autonomous’ video essays that are ‘able to “work” independently, without any written supplement’.[12]

This wish for audiovisual scholarship to function entirely within its own medium is perhaps best pursued by Bird’s statement, which is delivered in the style of a selfie video. This video, which seems spontaneously delivered yet is highly conceptualised and post-produced, provides a rich multimodal discourse that presents its textual references on screen, citing filmmakers, scholars, and activists as it explicitly addresses the politics, economics, and affective dimensions of laboring in the audiovisual and academic fields. While desktop documentary may be a key site for the production of scholarly subjectivity, its full potential may depend on activating other spaces to explore an even richer set of inquiries into the virtualisation of thought, labor, and social interaction and co-presence.

## Authors

Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker and educator who has produced nearly 400 video essays exploring film and media. He is the Locarno Film Festival Professor for the Future of Cinema

## DESKTOP DOCUMENTARY AS SCHOLARLY SUBJECTIVITY: FIVE APPROACHES

and the Audiovisual Arts at Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI). His award-winning *Transformers: The Premake* introduced the desktop documentary format and was named one of the best documentaries of 2014 by *Sight & Sound*. With his work *Bottled Songs* he was awarded the 2018 Sundance Institute Art of Nonfiction Grant, the 2018 European Media Artist Platform Residency, and the 2019 Eurimages Lab Project Award.

Ariel Avissar is a PhD student and Tisch Film School Scholar at Tel Aviv University. He is interested primarily in videographic criticism and television studies. His international videographic collaborations include 'Once Upon a Screen' (with Evelyn Kreutzer) and the 'TV Dictionary' project. He is an associate editor at *[in]Transition: The Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, and has co-edited several of the *Sight & Sound* 'Best Video Essays' polls (2019-2021). Avissar's video essay work has been published at *[in]Transition* and *The Cine-Files*.

## References

- 'About [in]Transition', *[in]Transition. Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*: <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/about>
- Baptista, T. 'Lessons in Looking: The Digital Audiovisual Essay' (PhD diss.), Birkbeck, University of London, 2016: 189-227.
- Galibert-Lainé, C. 'Watching the Pain of Others', *[in]Transition. Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, 6.3, 2019: <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/watching-pain-others>
- Galibert-Lainé, C. and Lee, K. 'Troubling the Desktop', *Filmmaker Magazine*, 14 March 2019: <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107208-troubling-the-desktop/>
- Kiss, M. 'Desktop Documentary: From Artefact to Artist(ic) Emotions', *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies*, 10.1, 2021: 99-119; <https://necsus-ejms.org/desktop-documentary-from-artefact-to-artistic-emotions/>
- Kiss, M. 'Videographic Scene Analyses, Part 1', *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies*, 7.1, 2018: 345-348; <https://necsus-ejms.org/videographic-scene-analyses-part-1/>
- Lee, K. 'Interface 2.0', *Frames Cinema Journal*, 1 July 2012: <https://framescinemajournal.com/article/interface-2-0/> (video accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5MQ51EfBM>)
- . 'Transformers: The Premake' (webpage): <https://www.alsolikelife.com/transformers-the-premake>
- McGoff, J. 'Screening Room: On Digital Film Festivals', *Vimeo*, 2021: <https://vimeo.com/519527850>
- Strauven, W. 'The Screenic Image: Between Verticality and Horizontality, Viewing and Touching, Displaying and Playing' in *Screens: From materiality to spectatorship: A historical and theoretical reassessment*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
- Tetik, T. 'Desktop Cinema as a New Aesthetic Style in the Post-Pandemic Era: Watching the Movie through Protagonist's Computer Screen' in *New communication in the post-pandemic era: Media, education, and information*. Peter Lang, 2021: 131-141.

## Additional resources on desktop documentaries:

Resources curated by 'Visible Evidence': <https://www.visibleevidence.org/article/desktop-documentaries>

Resources curated by Kevin B. Lee: <https://www.alsolikelife.com/screenstories>

Resources curated by Filmscalpel: <https://www.filmscalpel.com/glossary-desktop-documentary/>

Vimeo showcase curated by Ariel Avissar: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/7859780>

Youtube playlist curated by Ariel Avissar:  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWAqFPzOKzELRGjFu\\_GxdT6q1\\_Tvc5b9](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWAqFPzOKzELRGjFu_GxdT6q1_Tvc5b9)

## Notes

- [1] Lee, 'Transformers'.
- [2] Kiss 2021.
- [3] See Baptista 2016 and Strauven 2016.
- [4] Lee 2012.
- [5] Galibert-Lainé 2019.
- [6] See Kiss 2021 and Tetik 2021. For an example of a desktop video that deals explicitly with the effects of quarantine on media consumption and creation, see McGoff 2021.
- [7] The international video essay symposium 'Videography: Art and Academia: Epistemological, Political and Pedagogical Potentials of Audiovisual Practices', held on November 2022, was organised by Maïke Sarah Reinert, Evelyn Kreutzer, Anna-Sophie Philippi, and Kathleen Looek.
- [8] See Galibert-Lainé & Lee 2019.
- [9] See Kiss 2021.
- [10] Relatedly, the sequence of videos unexpectedly maps out the four classic stages of film production: conceptualisation/preproduction (Binotto), filming/production (Bird), editing/postproduction (Tedesco-Barlocco), viewing/distribution (Kaushik), and criticism/reception (Avissar, who also reflects on the previous four stages).
- [11] See 'About [in]Transition'.
- [12] See Kiss 2016.