

A Decade of [in]Transition

Reflecting on Past Challenges and Future Possibilities

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Abstract

“A Decade of *[in]Transition: Reflecting on Past Challenges and Future Possibilities*” describes the editorial experience of the award-winning, peer-reviewed journal *[in]Transition* on the occasion of its ten-year anniversary. After an introduction on the journal’s initial theoretical framing, the first part considers the production of new knowledge historically by engaging with select pieces published throughout the past decade while also reflecting on challenges the journal faced in the first decade of publication. It also considers early challenges faced by the editorial team such as the problem of establishing scholarly legitimacy for a new methodology and making the videographic method accessible to both junior and senior scholars. The second part considers the production of new knowl-

edge via newer provocations, such as vidding, the embrace of YouTube, and other videographic modes that push against traditionally-defined boundaries of the “essayistic.” Our reflections occur on the eve of *in[Transition]* migrating—after a decade as a joint venture with MediaCommons—to the Open Library of Humanities (OLH), joining a roster of other open access scholarly journals.

Keywords: editorial review, *[in]Transition*, knowledge effect, open peer review, videographic criticism.

Introduction

As the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic criticism, *[in]Transition* has advocated for the scholarly legitimacy of this new methodology through our unique open peer review system and our mission to explore what constitutes the creation of new scholarly knowledge. The founding editors established a central criterion underlying the kinds of scholarly work it would publish, specifically work that produces new scholarly knowledge through a creative use of multimedia tools. On the journal’s ten-year anniversary and in anticipation of the next step of our growth, we reflect upon the challenges and possibilities of publishing academic films while looking towards future trends. At the center of this is a consideration of how videographic criticism not only produces knowledge by conventional means, but also how it can produce, through engagement with and reworking of its source material, something more powerfully evocative: what might be described as a “knowledge effect.”

[in]Transition has phrased the concept of knowledge effect as such: work “should produce new knowledge about its subject, or about film and moving image studies, *through* its audiovisual form” (authors’ emphasis). Conceptually, this framework is inspired by Roland Barthes, in particular his essay “The Third Meaning” (1973). Reflecting on Barthes in the context of videographic forms, co-editor Christian Keathley discovered that working with audiovisual texts to frame a critical argument also pushes a maker toward using audiovisual features of the source material for aesthetic effect (Keathley and Mittell 2011). Keathley believes that what Barthes is proposing—the application of the poetic form upon scholarly writing—is uniquely applicable to videographic criticism: “the most ef-

fective videographic works—those that produce the most potent knowledge effect—are those that employ their audiovisual source materials in a poetically imaginative way” (Keathley 2011). Thus, early issues of *[in]Transition* celebrated work employing formal experimentation in order to generate knowledge effects beyond the informational and the symbolic. While recognizing the latter as meaningful scholarship, we privileged videographic work that could also achieve a third meaning through form. Similarly, co-editor Catherine Grant located a unique knowledge effect in videographic criticism as a form of performative research. For Grant, drawing from the work of J. L. Austin, Brad Haseman, and Barbara Bolt, the translation of research (symbolic data) into images and sounds creates “utterances that accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects” (Grant 2016). For Grant, this performativity includes such formal devices as the desktop documentary, multiple screens and text, and re-enactment and mosaic aesthetics. In short, for both Keathley and Grant, the promise of videographic criticism lay in how its novel form can both question and augment the production of new knowledge.

Recently, we note some healthy skepticism about this original direction, particularly in terms of rethinking the boundaries of scholarly inquiry and our expectation of “new knowledge.” For example, in their introduction to the insightful *The Cine-Files* issue 15, editors Tracy Cox-Stanton and Allison de Fren begin noting how “of necessity, [*[in]Transition* reviewers and essayists] had to consider what makes videographic work publishable” (2020). Indeed, there have been numerous occasions where we have reconsidered work that expands our boundaries of scholarship. For example, in that same issue of *The Cine-Files*, Ian Garwood offers a taxonomy of how *[in]Transition* creator statements work to justify the value of videographic work. His third category is specifically about how creators have pushed for expanding the boundaries of scholarship: “The scholarly value of video essays is enhanced by their association with (popular) internet culture” (2020). This is one area we have worked to engage more with, as it describes navigating an ongoing, contemporary change in creative digital technologies, access to primary materials, and dissemination avenues. How will the journal adapt its focus on scholarly videographic scholarship in order to embrace new creative practices and subjects?

We will be tracing this question via two analyses: Morton, one of the original co-founders of the journal, will consider the production of new knowledge by engaging with select pieces published throughout the past decade that reflect challenges the journal faced in the first decade of publication, most notably: the quest for institutional legitimization, the pedagogical challenge of teaching the technical aspects of videographic production alongside formal and rhetorical norms, and the assembly and mentorship of a diverse and inclusive roster of creators and reviewers. Ferguson, a 2019 addition to the editorial team, will consider the production of knowledge via newer provocations, such as vidding, the embrace of YouTube, and other videographic modes that push against traditionally-defined boundaries of the “essayistic.” (Note: Drew will be using the “we” pronoun, as the historical section was written with input from the larger collective, and Kevin will be using the “I” pronoun due to the speculative nature of his section.) Our reflections occur on the eve of *in[Transition]* migrating—after a decade as a joint venture with MediaCommons—to the Open Library of Humanities (OLH), joining a roster of other [open access scholarly journals](#).

Part One: Reflections on the Past (Drew Morton)

At the end of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference (SCMS) workshop “Visualizing Media Studies: The Expansion of Scholarly Publishing into Video Essays” in March 2014, we introduced the first issue of *[in]Transition*. This inaugural issue featured videos curated by the editorial team that best illustrated the scholarly potential for videographic criticism and might serve as models for exploring the methodology. These videos were published along with short commentaries where the co-editors attempted to mount cases for how they illustrated Barthes’s “knowledge effect.” As written in the introductory statement:

The goal of these inaugural issues is [...] to illustrate the breadth of work beyond obviously discursive or meta-critical essay formats, and to show that such forms may not only be promising as communicative tools but also as ones central to fundamentally changed procedures of audiovisual research *by digital practice* (Grant et al. 2014).

Keathley chose kogonada's "What is Neorealism?" to emphasize how delivery of the voiceover created a "mood of mystery, one not similarly achievable in writing" and how the filmmaker's use of split-screens and doubling creates an uncanny and dizzying effect. For Keathley, both devices not only allow us to "see" kogonada's argument, but also to "feel the vertiginous effect" of the knowledge" (Keathley 2014). Grant chose Thomas Elsaesser, Anne Bachmann, and Jonas Moberg's "Bergman's Senses." Using Elsaesser's own writing on museum culture, Grant wrote about how the compilation film structure can place unique demands on the spectator by expecting them to give "meaning to perception itself" (Grant 2014). Essentially, the subtraction of the individual clip from its contextual, narrative flow can be made to force the viewer to become a more active participant in realizing the work's argument. To quote Grant, "Unlike written texts, they don't have to remove themselves from film-specific forms of meaning production to have their knowledge effects on us. And we can *feel*, as well as know about, the comparisons these videos enact" (Grant 2013). In both their selections, Grant and Keathley highlighted the complementary affective dimensions of videographic work. Morton's curation, Benjamin Sampson's "Layers of Paradox in *F for Fake*," mapped Bill Nichols's documentary modes onto videographic criticism. Morton describes Sampson's video as a mixture of the expository and poetic modes (in contrast to a subject that largely uses reflexive and expository modes). That is, in order to function as scholarship, videographic criticism cannot completely share Orson Welles's approach to "making art about art" because Sampson is "making an argument about art" (Morton 2014). Morton was arguably the most conservative of the editorial team with regard to how he expected videographic works to produce knowledge. For Keathley and Grant, the knowledge effect advocated for by Barthes allowed for artful arguments. Morton, on the other hand, clung a bit to tradition.

Two main themes emerged in the enthusiastic conversations that took place after the SCMS workshop: the question of scholarly legitimacy and how to make the videographic method accessible to uninitiated scholars. One of the editorial team's initial concerns was the lack of a precedent for recognizing videographic criticism in promotion and tenure cases. To address this problem, the editorial team worked with the SCMS board to have *[in]Transition* officially

sanctioned as a collaborative “project” with the *Journal for Cinema and Media Studies*. Project manager Jason Mittell suggested the format of open peer review. Mittell encouraged the team to lean into the social media dimension of the MediaCommons host platform to explicitly foreground evolving debates about scholarship and for the sake of transparency. In short, let the peer reviewers make the case for why videographic work counts. In “Making it Count” for *The Cine-Files*, Ferguson and Morton (2020) later described a variety of practices for explaining videographic scholarship in tenure and promotion cases, but we regularly hear concerns from faculty about the impact of their videographic work on personnel committees.

Thus, the editorial team adopted open peer review and took it upon themselves to recruit a diverse editorial board that included established scholars who engaged in forms of academic filmmaking, filmmakers whose work functioned as a form of more popular criticism, and scholars who primarily worked in print who we felt would be strong supporters of this new methodology and whose expertise would be valued as the occasional peer reviewer. Beyond desk review, it was imperative to have submissions vetted by a subject area expert and a videographic critic who could speak to the work’s capacity to create a “knowledge effect.” Moreover, it was imperative to recruit an editorial board that understood their unique role in the open peer review process. Yet, there was an interlocked concern: by naming so many visible and productive videographic critics to our editorial team and expecting most of those scholar-creators to submit elsewhere to avoid conflicts of interest, would we receive a steady enough influx of polished submissions? The bigger question became how we might cultivate a deeper bench of practitioners, especially given how many videographic critics at the time were self-taught. We also needed to account for the relatively small number of practitioners at the time versus the amount of academic labour required for thorough peer review.

Initially, several members of the editorial team conducted workshops at the annual SCMS and other Media Studies conferences, helping to facilitate tutorials on ripping clips from physical media and sharing pre-production methods and general tips. In addition to the workshops, 2017 saw the launch of the Videographic Criticism and Digital Humanities Scholarly Interest Group (SIG) within SCMS. The SIG coordinated an “Ask a Practitioner” booth in the

book room designed to help colleagues troubleshoot technical problems or just have a casual conversation about getting a piece of scholarship started in a new format. While these initiatives were hopefully beneficial to our colleagues, none of them came close to having the impact of the annual Middlebury Scholarship in Sound & Image workshops facilitated by Grant, Keathley, and Mittell and the accompanying open access resource *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*. Through their workshops, more than seventy scholars have become part of the broader community of practitioners and twenty have published work in *[in]Transition* (Middlebury.edu). Moreover, several alumni have since organized their own videographic conferences while others have successfully lobbied for other scholarly publications to consider videographic works (Keathley 2023).

Returning to the question of how the journal has highlighted works that create a unique knowledge effect by reflecting upon the works we have published in the last decade, we see a methodologically diverse and critically robust selection of work. For instance, Booth Wilson's "Landscape in Paradigms: Ford's Monument Valley," Kevin Ferguson's "Volumetric Cinema," and the guest edited special issue on eye tracking showcased that videographic criticism could serve as a home for other digital humanities tools such as Google Earth and scientific imaging software. Shane Denson's "Don't Look Now: Paradoxes of Suture" was an interactive videographic work that enabled "the viewer to see, and to experiment with modes of seeing, in a new way" (Denson 2016). Miriam Ross's "Stereotowns" linked stereoscopic photography to contemporary 3D technology via one of the first 3D works of videographic criticism. The journal has published works on video games, live music accompaniment, HGTV house-flipping shows, and desktop documentaries.

To return to the concern about making the videographic method accessible enough to maintain viability, the journal has maintained a quarterly publication schedule for a decade now. As we prepared for the migration of *[in]Transition* to the Open Library of the Humanities, we determined that our acceptance rate has stayed between 25-35% over the last decade. The editorial team would note that we rarely issue a complete rejection (mainly reserved for cases where the submission does not fit the mission of the journal). In-

stead, the team and peer reviewers work to provide feedback for revision as long as the process is being undertaken in good faith. Submissions are either revised to the satisfaction of the editors and reviewers or are ultimately withdrawn by the submitter. In close, it has been the position of the editorial team to approach videographic criticism's capacity to create a knowledge effect with an open mind since the journal's inception, and we have only gotten more explicit in encouraging such a form of videographic practice.

Part Two: Looking to the Future (Kevin L. Ferguson)

I was invited to join the editorial team of *[in]Transition* in 2019, when the original collective expanded from four to six. I was familiar with the journal, having previously published in and served as a peer reviewer for it, but this would be my first time working in an editorial capacity on a project of this size. Thus, this reflection is informed by my entry into a developing field, with a desire to maintain standards while also looking to future directions. I believe the experimental nature of my more successful work marked me as a good candidate to potentially help the journal grow after its initial success, so I speak from a personal perspective that often but not always aligns with the larger editorial collective. At the time I had no idea what to expect, what to say, when to push back, or when to simply agree, particularly around that recurring primal question: is this really what we mean by "videographic"?

I was delighted to find an open-minded, egalitarian group who shared the same concerns. There was already a clear editorial vision in place, but there was also a palpable curiosity about submitted work outside of our respective backgrounds. Sometimes this had to do with the subject ("I've never even heard of this Galician filmmaker"), the approach ("I'm not as familiar with disability studies as I could be"), or the technique ("I have no idea how 3D video actually works"). To me, videographic work in particular requires equal attention to these three distinct components of scholarship, such that identifying potential reviewers was often a unique puzzle of pairing subject expertise with videographic experience. It would not be enough to confirm that the ideas or arguments were in line with academic norms; the videographic expression of those ideas needed to carry as much, if not more, weight.

A dizzying amount of change has happened in the world in the five years since I joined *[in]Transition*, exacerbated in no small part by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has affected academic publishing in both small ways, such as delayed response times or publishing schedules, and large ones, such as the relevance of new media technology or new uses of existing ones. For example, spending increased amounts of time on the then-new application Zoom—learning how to screen share or use emojis or raise one’s hand to speak—offered a crash course in establishing new communal norms for presenting oneself digitally. TikTok reached one billion users in 2021, the same year Facebook rebranded as Meta and heavily invested in virtual and augmented reality experiences; both companies’ success would depend on balancing a consumer’s familiarity with existing concepts of what the internet “was for” with the promise of new, enhanced experiences. For TikTok, this meant capitalizing on a direction previously staked out by Vine, which was primarily mobile-first and emphasized brevity; for Meta, the opposite was true, requiring additional virtual reality hardware and encouraging longer periods of engagement. How would videographic criticism adapt to new uses of media technology? How might an increasing reliance on screens for professional, educational, and personal contact during the pandemic shape the videographic form?

TikTok and Meta are but two cursory examples in a contemporary media ecology that might help us look to the future of academic filmmaking. Today, the field finds itself relatively established, with multiple peer-reviewed journals, numerous annual conferences, and recognition by academic departments. This is not to say that videographic criticism is as yet as universally accepted as the traditional monograph or written article, but practitioners are in general less burdened by the earlier need to justify the approach itself. Some of this no doubt also stems from the wider cultural acceptance of audiovisual forms for disseminating information in general. Searching for information will increasingly lead to a narrated video rather than a bulleted list; while Google still returns text-based results first, “videos” as an ontological category are generally listed second.

However, the satisfaction that comes with recognition carries a warning: what’s next? The wider interest in and accessibility of the audiovisual is, ironically, probably not great news for media literacy in the humanities: TikTok is awash with pseudo-science misin-

formation; YouTube (owned by Google) is filled with hours-long monetized “reviews” promising to “explain the ending” of cultural texts; X (formerly Twitter) readily invites the quick dissemination of false videos of news events. And at the time of writing, it is too early to tell just how bad AI-generated content or deepfakes will be, but . . . I think it is safe to say it will be very bad without a corollary attention to developing media literacy strategies.

I could go on in this techno-skeptic vein, but what most captivates me intellectually about trends I would otherwise see as terrifying are the potential ways they might cross-pollinate and enrich the field of academic filmmaking. To return to the three different categories I mentioned above that frequently guide my editorial thinking at *[in]Transition*—subject, approach, technique—I find myself simultaneously skeptical of and intrigued by:

- how YouTube’s monetization policies and algorithms have developed certain norms around video length, thumbnails, and presentational style;
- the role of film festivals such as The Marienbad Film Festival or Uppsala Short Film Festival in offering a venue for scholarly work that is frequently more poetic than explanatory and the relationship between festival success and academic recognition;
- the dominance of mobile, app-based sites of production such as TikTok and Snapchat that encourage remix or reuse, frequently inviting self-presentation as a primary mode of address.

Let’s look more specifically at a fourth example that to me currently generates the most interesting provocations for the state of academic filmmaking: works that deal with fan cultures and practices. These are videographic works that tend to focus on popular texts not typically embraced by the academy, use newer theoretical juxtapositions, and/or adopt techniques that borrow more from contemporary social media practices than from traditional written scholarship. While aca-fan practices are not in and of themselves novel in academic contexts, (cf. Jenkins 1992), there has been less videographic work in this vein. A good example of this form is Samantha Close’s (2023) “*Speculative Identification: (a character study)*,” recently published in *[in]Transition*, which uses fan-written fiction, hashtags, and popular song lyrics to examine a character in the adaptation of

the fantasy series *Good Omens* (2019). Close's work uses some conventional videographic techniques, such as on-screen text and sound replacement, but also draws from fan cultures rather than academic ones in ways that made me reconsider the boundary (if there should be one) between academic work and fan cultures. After all, as Melanie Kohnen wrote in her review, "both fan fiction and academic analysis represent the act of communal knowledge production" and producing new knowledge is the essential requirement for our journal.

The journal has seen increased submissions in this area, but I have also noticed more discussion of fan-based practices at academic conferences. For me, 2022's "[Theory & Practice of the Video-Essay](#)" conference at UMass Amherst illuminated the challenges and frustrations of newer voices feeling they needed, as with videographic criticism in its initial days, to make an argument for justifying inclusion. I was struck by work from practitioners such as Clare O'Gara and Anne Ciecko, who presented, from quite different perspectives, an argument for expanding the field of what we consider appropriate subjects, approaches, and techniques, often explicitly in opposition to more traditional academic filmmaking standards.

At the same time, the ubiquity of uncritical or amateurish "video essays" on YouTube seems to incline academics to resist accepting more popular modes. On social media, well-known practitioner Kevin B. Lee (2023) recently responded to a "generational" taxonomy of YouTube video essay waves with a reminder of a pre-2016 "Gen Zero" of YouTubers, also including Matt Zoller Seitz, kogonada, and Jim Emerson, that "gave zero fucks about copyright" at the time and whose work is mostly erased today because of copyright strikes. This is a helpful reminder that the media historical practices of even the last decade can shift radically as creators respond to technological affordances, in both positively creative and historically destructive ways. In this vein, the 2022 Sight & Sound poll of Best Video Essays begins by paradoxically noting "one consistent trait: diversity" (Lee et al. 2023). Indeed, the list includes a wide range of work that would have likely surprised the field ten years ago. It is easy to identify work that needs improvement for forms that one is already familiar with. Seeing the future is much more challenging.

[in]Transition's first decade of existence finds it well poised to meet this challenge. Our new platform will more robustly address

preservation and access issues, with diamond open access policies that allow for the widest reach for contributors and readers. As the editorial collective also reshapes, we will continue to encourage a diverse range of videographic practices and perspectives, embracing future directions in scholarship.

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