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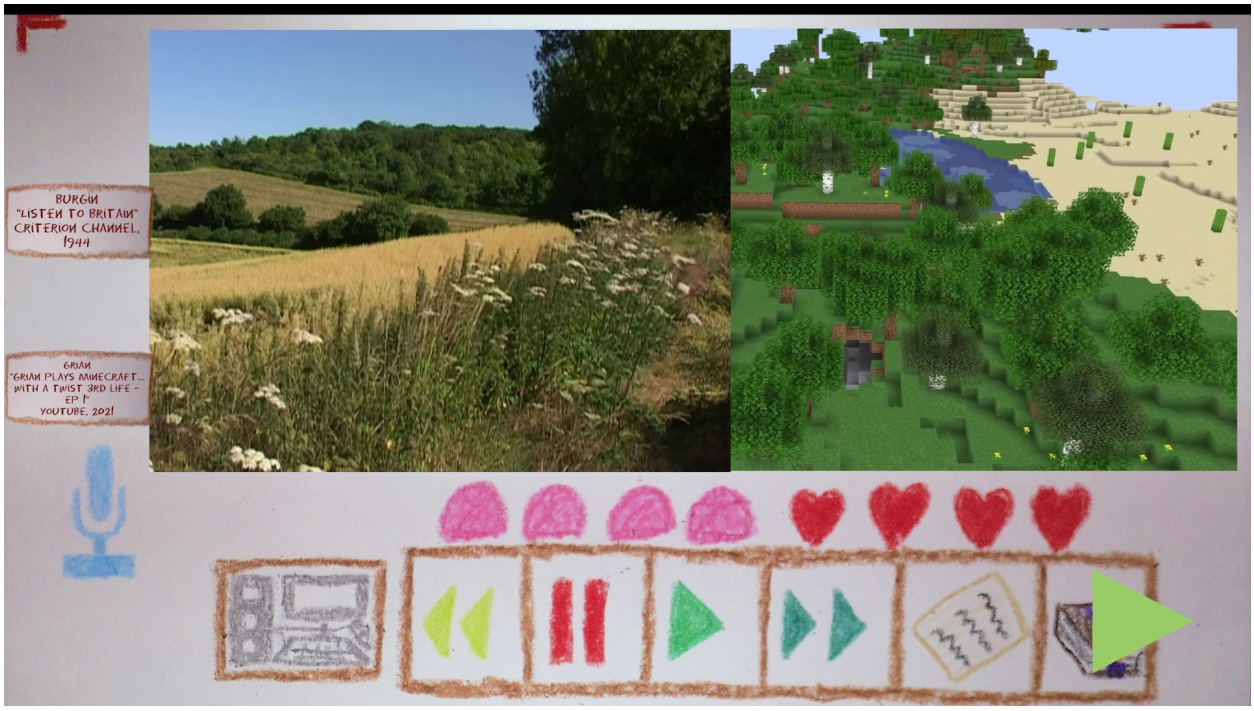
Feeling Our Way Through the Spectrum of Videographic Criticism



Samantha Close *is an Assistant Professor of Media and Popular Culture in the College of Communication at DePaul University. She is the creator of videographic criticism, particularly where it intersects with fan video, and ethnographic documentary, from her on-going research on crafters who sell their work online.*

ABSTRACT

Critical argument can be generative in much the same way as art can be, inspiring different "correct" interpretations and new arguments. Academic filmmaking enhances this property by incorporating affective tools and texts, such as vivid footage or popular music, that

move us emotionally at the same time as they form part of a critical argument—and, indeed, those emotional reactions form part of the argument. In this piece, I present a spectrum of approaches that academic filmmaking takes in the videographic criticism tradition: straightforwardly explanatory on one end and enigmatically poetic on the other. I argue that this scholarly methodology is simultaneously deeply personal and affective and, to at least the same degree, imbricated with technological infrastructures.

Keywords: methodology, videographic criticism, digital media, affect, popular music

When I last taught students about non-traditional forms of academic publication, they raised the provocation that the difference between "art" and "argument" is that argument has a clear win condition—you can "get it" or, as despairing students often complain, "I don't get it." In this view, critical argument sounds like a video game, which some define specifically by the ability to "win"—or at least score points (Gameservatory 2021). Art, on the other hand, makes you experience something that is subjective to you. You cannot be wrong about art, they suggested, in the same way you can be wrong about a critical text.

I think many scholars would be depressed by this interpretation of critical argument. They might point to the plethora of interpretations and ideas spawned by central critical thinkers like Foucault or Mulvey as evidence that argument too can spark things inside you that are unique to you, and which you then cite as you express your new ideas in the same medium (writing, in this case)—much as a painter might recall an influential work through their choice of subject, pose of figures, or brush stroke technique. You can still certainly be wrong in how you do this, but there are many more than just one way to win, aka "be right."

Academic filmmaking expands these possibilities of critical argument-as-art. Grant (2016, para. 5) argues that audiovisual scholarship is "performative;" the works "accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects." These "effects" seem much wider than could be suggested by a "right answer." Such is clear in

Morton's (2017, 131-132) evident joy in how the two *[in]Transition* peer reviewers for Nick Warr's (2016) videographic piece "Honolulu Mon Amour" diverge, with Christine Becker responding largely to "its juxtaposition of works on very different rungs of the cultural taste hierarchy" and Gordon Hon responding more along the lines of Warr's own stated intentions. *[in]Transition*, the most prominent peer-reviewed media studies journal for videographic criticism, endorses this multiplicity of interpretation at an institutional level by not only publishing the author's essay and statement but the two peer reviews as well.

To Morton's (2017) identification of documentary filmmaking and avant-garde art as forerunners of videographic criticism, I (like Morimoto (2016), Stein (2019), Coppa (2022), and Garwood (2022)) would add the popular, vernacular practice of fannish video-making, alternatively called vidding, anime music video editing, or simply editing, depending on the fandom. Fannish videos "construct or emphasize feelings and emotions" as well as responding to "the critical/analytical impulses that cause vidders to want to remake television" (Coppa in response to Morimoto 2016). They do this in a plethora of sub-genres but very often with an editing style built on synchresis, or "the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears at the same time" (Chion 1994, 224). The effect is both one of the mind—forcing you to reconsider the images and the sounds in light of each other—and one of the body—you are affected, emotionally, by the experience, which produces its own kind of knowledge. Fans tend to use popular sources, but the same effect is in virtuosic display in Catherine Grant's (2015) videographic piece "Carnal Locomotive," which uses kinetic typography and slow-motion in conjunction with the "propulsive rhythmic 'feel'" of the song "Hallon," by Christian Bjoerklund to analyze *Le Jour et l'heure (The Day and the Hour)* (dir. René Clément, 1963).

By expanding critical argument into the realm of multiple, subjective interpretations, however, we are also challenging one of its (previous) core tenets: that everyone can "get it." Experiential affect is binary—you either feel something or you don't. When it comes to audiovisual works, that feeling is heavily impacted by taste. As Wilson (2014) puts it, "When you hate a song, the reaction tends to

come in spasms. Hearing it can be like having a cockroach crawl up your sleeve" (p.3). Scholars often have more esoteric tastes, which might be one reason why pop songs are so rare in videographic criticism, despite the example of fannish video-making and the way "the critical, transformative and affective qualities of this music-led form seem perfectly matched with the values that inform videographic criticism" (Garwood 2022).

In the accompanying video essay, I argue that as scholars we must train ourselves to "feel" past these instinctive reactions, to open our hearts in the same way as we are traditionally trained to open our minds. I do this by first demonstrating two different approaches to making audiovisual scholarship about the internet video genre of *Minecraft* Survival Multi-Player (SMP) series. The first excerpt is straightforwardly explanatory, using video-making as a medium for the dissemination of research results. The music is instrumental and was originally created as a soundtrack for the landmark anime *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (dir. Kunihiko Ikuhara, 1997)—I want it to evoke the postmodernism that the show is so celebrated for and which plays a key role in my argument. The second excerpt is almost fully poetic in the fannish tradition and imports the pop song "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen as a text to think-feel with about the SMP series. I say "almost" because I've added some signposts explaining why I made certain choices, clarifying the themes I'm exploring. But, as Keathley (2011) argues, "if the goal is still the production of some knowledge, the challenge for the 'digital film critic' is to situate herself somewhere in the middle of these alternatives, borrowing the explanatory authority of one and the poetical power of the other" (p.190). The third piece embedded in my video essay is an attempt at just this, importing Daft Punk's song "Technologic" while also putting forward a running critical commentary about the subject, the process of academic filmmaking itself. The song's driving beat and lyrics combine with sped-up screen recordings of my desktop to suggest that we need to be careful about how much we commit ourselves to filmmaking practice, lest it drain us dry of not only mental energy but also heart. Softening this is the evidence of scholarly community seen in the footage and reinforced by the written commentary, which can serve as a buffer against the relentless pace of contemporary academe.

But what might stand out most to viewers in the video essay is one of my framing devices: a hand-drawn (with crayon) version of the *Minecraft* interface. I customized it for the academic filmmaker, putting a desktop computer in the "offhand" where one keeps tools that should always be handy, and providing commands to media as well as buttons to bring up books, articles, other video essays, and suchlike. I wanted to leave my fingerprints all over the video, highlighting both the personal and subjective nature of this research process and its simultaneously deep imbrication with technological tools.

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