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# Academic Filmmaking in the New Humanities

Video Essays. Introduction to the special issue

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## **Abstract**

The article provides an introduction to the second of a pair of special issues devoted to academic filmmaking, which contains ten video essays and prose guiding texts. The article describes the variety of filmmaking practice in the academy, and some of the venues where examples of the practice are published or exhibited. It gestures at the multiple origins of academic filmmaking with special reference to the tradition of the essay film, and finds a key reflexive

moment in Eric S. Faden's (prose) "Manifesto for Critical Media" (2008), which articulated the challenge of using "image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm" to create scholarly audiovisual work. The introduction goes on to set out the aims for the special issues, and to describe the contents of the video essays and some of the features, concerns or approaches shared between and across those contents. The video essays derive from fields including videographic criticism, anthropology, experimental cinema, and participatory and activist filmmaking.

**Keywords:** Video essays, digital humanities, experimental scholarship, videographic criticism, practice research

This is the second of a pair of special issues devoted to academic filmmaking in the New Humanities, understood as a conglomeration of hybrid practices — such as digital humanities, environmental humanities, medical humanities, posthumanities, and public humanities — that reach across the arts to the social and natural sciences even as they incorporate and extend traditional humanities concerns and methods. With these two special issues, we have wished to evidence and interrogate the possibilities of filmmaking as research method, medium of scholarly communication and also as a distinct mode of thinking for this conglomeration of hybrid practices. This first issue contains eleven prose articles, while the second contains ten video essays accompanied by guiding texts. The first part of the short introduction is nearly identical in both special issues, but the latter part sets out the individual contents of each issue and indicates some of the features, concerns or approaches shared between and across those contents.

Because of the diversity of its practices and origins, any definition of academic filmmaking can only be a tautology: academic filmmaking simply refers to film or video made by academics or filmmaking practices undertaken by them. Some of the range of academic filmmaking can be examined in venues including *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy*, *Screenworks*, the journal of screen media practice research, *Journal of Anthropological Films*, *Journal of Embodied Research* (JER), the "Beyond The Text" strand of *Sociological Research Online*, and *[in]Transition*, a journal of videographic film and moving image studies. (Both JER and *[in]Transition* are discussed by their editors in

the first of these special issues, while the editors of *Sightlines* are also represented.) Academic film and video are also increasingly shown at conferences and festivals, and in museums, institutions which themselves draw on academic labour and expertise in the creation and curation of audiovisual works.

Filmmaking in the academy sometimes takes the form of practice (or practice-led / practice-based) research or creative (or creative-critical) research, in which, in order to generate knowledge, the film-making observes protocols from the arts rather than from traditional scholarship, even if such work is often accompanied by explication in more conventional prose forms (Nelson 2022, Lulkowska 2024). This is the case for much of the influential practice of special issue co-editor Catherine Grant, whose body of work includes contemplative digital videos like *Dissolves of Passion: A Film within a Film* (2014), a piece she locates in relation to both video art and scholarly concerns in a subsequent prose article (Grant 2019). But academic filmmaking takes place in a variety of modes: from documentary record and essay filmmaking to fictional storytelling, from participatory filmmaking to experiments (like Grant's *Dissolves of Passion*) in found footage curation and remix, from illustrated lecture to artistic experiment. Perhaps the best-known example of research film-making born in the academy is Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012), which uses a mix of straightforward documentary and imaginative reenactment to record and denounce the legacy of the 1965-66 Indonesian genocide. Forensic Architecture, a "research agency" based at Goldsmiths, University of London, likewise employ film as one of their techniques to investigate human rights violations, and to present their findings. The Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab uses film to access dimensions of the world that resist description in words, for example in the well-received *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012), while anthropologist Christian Suhr uses a combination of prose and film in his *Descending With Angels: Islamic Exorcism and Psychiatry* (2019), described as a "film monograph", to speak nearby — to use Trinh T. Minh-ha's resonant phrase (Chen 1992)— the invisible phenomena of jinn possession and psychosis among Muslims living in Denmark. Artist filmmaker and academic Joanna Callaghan uses a mix of fictional and documentary modes in films including the 80-minute *Love in the*

*Post* (2014), inspired by Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, to explore ethical questions and women's experience.

It is worth noting that filmmaking in the academy has a history that long predates the digital period, stretching back through, for example, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's influential "theory film" *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). Mulvey herself has gone on to interrogate the affordances of the digital in a monograph, *Death 24x a Second* (2006) and short experimental videos like her remix of a scene from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Mulvey 2014), that have been particularly influential on the new field of videographic criticism, referring to the audiovisual analysis of audiovisual and screen media. Working separately and sometimes together, Kevin B. Lee (contributor to the first of these two special issues) and Chloé Galibert-Laîné have developed the desktop documentary format (the recording of the computer screen) to critique the industries of spectacle and capture the complexities of online life in compelling films like Lee's "Transformers: the Premake" (2014) and Galibert-Laîné's "Watching the Pain of Others" (2019). Videographic critic Ian Garwood uses the desktop format reflexively to interrogate "The place of voiceover in academic audiovisual film and television criticism" (2016) and is developing an audiovisual research project to the equivalent of book length (see Garwood 2020). The first such "videographic book" was published in spring 2024 in a series edited by Jason Mittell and published online by Lever Press. This is Mittell's own *The Chemistry of Character in "Breaking Bad"*, a collection of more than twenty videos ranging in length from a few minutes to a couple of hours, hosted on the digital platform Fulcrum and interspersed with prose reflections (Mittell 2024).

As this brief survey may suggest, the practices and so the origins of academic filmmaking are multiple: these origins include feature film and experimental cinema, news reportage and photojournalism, artist film and video, ethnographic film and documentary film in all of the modes identified by Bill Nichols (poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative; see Nichols 2017), as well as film pedagogy (Pantenburg 2024). Key to the increasing presence of filmmaking in the academy and to the emergence of fields like videographic criticism has been the consumerization of digital technology and the relative affordability of film and computing hardware and editing software. In his "Manifesto

for Critical Media” published in 2008, film and media studies scholar Eric S. Faden located the practice of academic video essay-making in the tradition of the essay film reaching back to the Soviet filmmakers of the 1930s, and in a historical context of electronic—more recently, digital—culture that has superseded the alphabetic. Faden writes that academic video essay-making “does not replace traditional scholarship”; rather, “[t]his is a *new* practice beyond traditional scholarship.” To use terminology that Faden himself does not use, the video essay assumes *literacy* but is founded upon and cultivates *audiovisualcy*. Moreover, video essay-making implies “a shift in rhetorical mode”:

The traditional essay is argumentative—thesis, evidence, conclusion. Traditional scholarship aspires to exhaustion, to be the definitive, end-all-be-all, last word on a particular subject. The media stylo [Faden’s term for scholarly video essays], by contrast, suggests possibilities—it is not the end of scholarly inquiry; it is the beginning. It explores and experiments and is designed just as much to inspire as to convince. (Faden 2008)

Many scholars have since taken up Faden’s challenge of considering “image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm” in order to create scholarly audiovisual work, and (as set out below) it’s fair to say that the audiovisual works in the second of this pair of special issues confirm the exploratory and experimental character of the scholarly video essay that Faden identifies.

Along with the adoption of the audiovisual, there has emerged a lively and ongoing debate, amongst practitioners of videographic criticism especially, about the appropriate form that the digital video essay should take for the purposes of scholarship. This debate has taken place in dedicated books (van den Berg and Kiss 2016; Grizzaffi 2017; Keathley, Mittell and Grant 2019) and in journal special issues like *The Cine-Files* 15 (Cox-Stanton and de Fren 2020), which asks the question “what constitutes videographic scholarship?”. Beyond that, there is a scattered but substantial corpus of special sections or journal articles (and videos) that theorise videographic criticism or reflect on scholars’ own videographic practice in terms relevant for other scholars (see for example Keathley 2011; Grant

2014 and 2019; Mittell 2019 and 2021; Binotto 2020; Garwood 2020; Kiss 2021, 2024; O'Leary 2021; Bird 2023; Sekar 2024). Supplementing these reflections are the interviews conducted by Will Di-Gravio and his collaborator Emily Su Bin Ko on the *Video Essay Podcast*, inaugurated in 2019 with an interview with co-editor Catherine Grant.

The present pair of special issues reprises the task of evidencing and debating the possibilities of the video essay for scholarly practice. The editors' primary aim has been to bring together practitioners and scholars of filmmaking research, academic film and video-graphic criticism from across a range of disciplines to consider the affordances and challenges of filmmaking as means and medium of investigation and communication. But the special issues, and the second of the two especially, are also intended to debate and to demonstrate *how* the video essay can work as a scholarly form. The contributors adopt a variety of approaches to articulating their scholarly aims in the audiovisual form of a video essay. As the *Academic Quarter* submissions guide puts it: "Video essays should be original works of publishable quality in a rigorous scholarly context, and may take argumentative, expository, explanatory, documentary, performative, essayistic, poetic, symbolic (metaphorical) or artistic forms, or a combination of these." Most of the video essays published here do indeed offer a combination of these approaches. However, the reader/viewer is asked to notice how communication is performed most often not through explicit argumentation, but through affect, dialogic procedures, evocation and juxtaposition, questioning rather than answering, and even through irony. As Faden suggested in his 2008 manifesto, the video essay "moves scholarship beyond just creating knowledge and takes on an aesthetic, poetic function". The co-editors would argue that the videos in the second of our special issues suggest that this poetic function is essential to the knowledge function.

Note, however, that the videos in the second special issue do not appear alone. Building on established practice in journals like *[in]Transition*, each video is accompanied by a creator statement or "guiding text", designed to articulate "the research aims and process of the work as well as the ways in which those aims are achieved in the audiovisual form". The provision of a supporting statement is modelled after standard procedure for the articulation



of research questions and methods in university-based practice-research projects, as set out for example in the style guide of the UK-based *Screenworks* journal, founded in 2007, and described in the contribution to these special issues by Kerrigan, Frankham and Verdon. We acknowledge a key difference between our special issues and these journals: both *[in]Transition* and *Screenworks* publish the peer reviews along with each video (*[in]Transition* even provides the names of reviewers); in this context, the “act of scholarship” emerges in the encounter and intersection between the video and several prose texts (and multiple authors). We do not provide the peer reviews here, though we are extremely grateful to the very many reviewers who have generously lent their time and expertise to the preparation of these special issues: the positive stamp of their labour is all over the submissions and the project as a whole. However, we will point out that there is no assumption here that the video essays are to be considered as “autonomous objects”. It might go without saying that no scholarly output is an autonomous object; but it should be more apparent than usual that the content of the scholarship is to be grasped in a dialogue—in this case, a dialogue of video and accompanying prose text, as well as the existing body of creative and scholarly practice with which each submission engages.

As mentioned above, the co-editors have worked with the understanding that filmmaking can be used by scholars as a *means* to investigate a particular theme, phenomenon or object, or as a *medium* to report or publicise research results, or it can be understood as a *mode of thought* in itself (what some describe, drawing on Spatz (2018), as the “video way of thinking”). In the call for submissions, we asked potential contributors to respond to one or more of the following questions:

- What are the political, epistemic, and aesthetic advantages of filmmaking in the academic context, and what are its potentials?
- What place is there for experimental approaches to filmmaking in academic practice?
- What is the relationship and relative importance of process and product in academic filmmaking practice?

- What methods are used in academic filmmaking across the different disciplines? What do these have in common and how do they differ?
- What are the institutional opportunities for and impediments to the adoption and development of filmmaking in the academy?
- What are the challenges and possibilities for the publication or exhibition of academic filmmaking?

All of these questions have come to be addressed in one or more prose or video contributions across the two issues. In the next section, we summarise the individual contents of each issue and indicate some of the themes or approaches shared among those contents.

### **Video essays and guiding texts**

The first video essay, Ariel Avissar's witty and ironic "This Is Not What I Normally Do': An Insignificant Step in the Downfall of the Humanities", begun during the Videographic Methods and Practices: Embodying the Video Essay workshop held at Bowdoin College in July 2023, explores the experimental, ludic, and humorous possibilities of videographic criticism. With cameos and inputs from several participants and teachers from the workshop and from the broader field of videographic criticism, this video is also a testament to the experience of participating in a workshop of this kind and in the communities that are made possible as a result of a shared academic filmmaking experience.

Avissar's video is followed by Barbara Zecchi's equally complex, playful and experimental "An accented video way of thinking: Becoming videoessay". This is the latest video essay in Zecchi's already influential exploration of "the accented video essay" towards the theorization (riffing on Spatz 2018) of an "accented video way of thinking", and (like Avissar) Zecchi underscores her project by drawing explicitly on the work and images of other well-known and diversely-accented video essayists. In the emphasis on "becoming", this work reprises themes of embodiment discussed in the articles by Binotto and Spatz in the first special issue. A contribution of this work is also the author's call for replacing the commonly used term "video essay" with the Spanish-influenced spelling "videoessay" as way of revindicating an accented choice.



Stephen Broomer's "Against Illustration" argues—through a self-aware voiceover that cites Raymond Bellour and György Lukács, and through the manipulation and organisation of a visual content drawn from early cinema, Muybridge and Michael Snow—for the poetic and intuitive possibilities of experimental videographic criticism. This video essay positions itself against illustrative forms of audiovisual scholarship in favour of "a methodology of purposeful difficulty" informed by George Steiner. For Broomer, such a methodology makes room for more ambiguous, sensual, and entangled uses of image and sound, locating scholarly investigation in the collage tradition and specifically in the works of the experimental filmmakers Charles Ridley, Bruce Conner, and Peter Tscherkassky.

Contrasting but also converging with Broomer's citational aesthetic and episteme, Samantha Close argues for the video essay as medium of affect in "Feeling Our Way Through the Spectrum of Videographic Criticism". In their contribution to the first of our special issues, Drew Morton and Kevin Ferguson wonder about the implications for audiovisual scholarship of fannish modes like "vidding" (making music video from beloved media objects); Close practices and interrogates vidding as one of a range of modes ranging from explanatory to "enigmatically poetic" in her video essay, which considers the internet video genre of Minecraft Survival Multi-Player. A striking device in the video essay is Close's crayon-rendered version of the Minecraft interface to frame and "command" her investigation, thereby highlighting, as she writes, "the personal and subjective nature of this research process and its simultaneously deep imbrication with technological tools."

The video essay triptych by Nina Jones, Jemma Saunders and Ella Wright titled "Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice" is comprised of the video essays "Academically Insane" (Jones), "Without Knowing It" (Wright) and "Joining the Dots" (Saunders). The authors write that these works "attribute value to the place of experimental approaches within academic filmmaking". They were made with materials gathered during the B-Film Creative Practice Colloquium for practice research PhDs at the University of Birmingham in June 2023 in which participants reflected on being creative practice researchers, including how they perceive themselves and how they believe to be perceived by others in the academic community. Combined, these

video essays articulate a need for more institutional and community support and understanding for videographic and creative practice within academia.

Maud Ceuterick and Carola Gianotti Mura's contribution is also a compound work. "Academic filmmaking and its discontents: in between videographic criticism and visual anthropology" puts in dialogue two videos, "Filming Out Loud" and "Whose Stories", made from the same raw footage. While Ceuterick reworks the footage using conventions from videographic criticism, Gianotti Mura draws on visual anthropology and ethnographic film methods for her video. Together, these videos reflect on (at least) two possibilities for academic filmmaking and how they might diverge or overlap. This joint submission was also made in the context of a workshop, this time in an ethnographic filmmaking at the University of Manchester's Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in June 2022.

Adopting another sort of dialogic mode, Paul Cooke and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers' "Attempting an Ontology of Participatory Film" reflects on the limitations of ethnographic film and specifically of participatory filmmaking, described by the authors as a distinct mode of production with social justice aims. Focusing on two activist-focussed participatory video projects led by Cooke with young people in South Africa and Lebanon, and turning to Bazin's writings on the ontology of the photographic image, Cooke and Schwandner-Sievers discuss the benefits and pitfalls of allowing images to "speak for themselves". How is the intention of the participant-filmmakers affected as their films move from community showcasing events to festival and academic settings? The (in)stability of meaning becomes a videographic and ethical question posed but left deliberately unanswered by Cooke and Schwandner-Sievers.

Using footage of anonymous tourists at Grand Central Station, New York, shot by the author on a smartphone, Paul Newland's "The Participants" reflects on filmmaking ethics when it comes to filming others without their consent. While Cooke and Schwandner-Sievers take on philosophical questions of meaning conveyed by images produced in participatory video workshops, Newland's anti- or a-participatory filmmaking proposes a provocation in the context of university ethical procedures (essential or inflexible, depending on one's perspective) and on the limitations of participant

consent. The combination of slow motion footage and on-screen text makes this a suggestive addition to the genre of epigraphic video essays.

Sebastian Wiedemann and Verónica Naranjo's "Present Bodies. Emancipated Voices. Or, how to relocate bodies in thought" is a collective video essay that, again, grew from a workshop—in this case, a workshop on gender-based violence during the CineToro Experimental Film Festival in Toro, Colombia, in 2022. Wiedemann and Naranjo see their video as an exercise in "radical tenderness" that locates the body at its centre. The video, accompanied by violin and by participant voices expressing the aspiration for social and bodily agency, shows images of the participants' hands constructing celebratory fabric images of bodies with vulvas, uteruses and breasts. Wiedemann and Naranjo's use of the audiovisual as a research method self-consciously draws on "experimental film as a field of emancipatory and decolonial encounter between the arts, gender studies, and feminist direct political-aesthetic actions".

Laura Dávila Argoty and Valentina Giraldo Sánchez' "Towards an Ecology of Practices in Academic Filmmaking: Speaking nearby Ana Vaz, Javiera Cisterna and Sofía Gallisá" is a sensorial video essay that interweaves the work of the three experimental filmmakers from Brazil, Chile and Puerto Rico, respectively. Like Wiedemann and Naranjo, this video essay and guiding text calls for an anti-colonialist, less extractivist, more plural and collective way of seeing in academic filmmaking. Like Close and Broome, Dávila Argoty and Giraldo Sánchez find places for affect and entanglement in videographic practice. And like the majority of the video essays contained in the special issue, they insist on, even as they interrogate, the place available for experimental approaches to filmmaking in academic and institutional contexts.

With these two special issues, the co-editors hope to have contributed to the definition or, better, the intensification of the affordances of filmmaking in the academy. Our ethos has been the same as that which Eric Faden (2008) sees as characteristic of the critical video essay itself: we have not tried to offer the "definitive, end-all-be-all, last word" on our theme, but have instead encouraged contributors to suggest possibilities and offer points of departure. Faden writes that a critical videographic practice "explores and experiments and is designed just as much to inspire as to convince"

(Faden 2008). This is also true of our project in these special issues on filmmaking as research method, communication medium and mode of thought in the New Humanities.

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