

What Scholarly Video Essays Feel Like

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As an aspiring scholar currently working on my PhD, I have over the last years spent as much time and energy trying to understand the explicit and unspoken rules of written scholarship, as I have spent developing my own approach to videographic research. I am young enough to have discovered the video essay in the classroom, which makes me representative of a second generation of practitioners, after pioneers like Catherine Grant, Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell and many others. For this reason, I feel that I have less authority than others to contribute to the establishment of rules (if only of thumb) about the implementation of video essays into the canon of film and media studies methodologies. What I can share are my experiences as a spectator of scholarly video essays, and as a practitioner who is still in the process of understanding what academic research is, or can be.

A Video Essayist in a PhD Program

Maybe it is worth recounting my background briefly, as it informs directly my perspective on the scholarly video essay. I started directing films before I graduated from high school; I went to college with the ambition to become a filmmaker. My studies led me to discover my own curiosity for theoretical research and to encounter more experimental approaches to filmmaking. My master's theses in Film Studies and Sociology had no videographic component, but I continued during those years to write and direct films aside from my academic work. I discovered the video essay format in a class at the University of Vienna taught by Michael Baute, and it inspired me to "translate" the few scholarly articles I had written until then into videos. I loved everything about this process, from the

theoretical issues it raised (about the interpretation of abstract ideas into images and sounds) to the very practical questions I had to solve (trying out different editing rhythms or different tones of voice for my narration). It also excited me that my video essays could reach a much wider audience and elicit more diverse responses than my nascent written scholarship. This was the time when practice-based research PhD programs (or “thèses en recherche-crédation” as we call it here) started to develop in France. I saw this as an exciting opportunity to work towards the convergence of my passion for filmmaking and my growing interest in theoretical research, and I proposed a project that included the production of several video essays. I was lucky enough to enroll in the SACRe program at the Ecole normale supérieure de Paris, where my colleagues were mainly professional artists and worked in all possible fields, including live performance, music composition, visual arts, design, and cinema. I was the first, and for several years the only, video essayist in the program.

As I am now reaching the end of my time as a PhD candidate, I think a lot about how these years of rigorous academic training, but also of companionship with all these artists, have informed my practice as a video essayist. For one thing, I have evolved from seeing the video essay as a format for disseminating my pre-existing research to exploring its potential as an experimental, free and playful research method. In my process, research and videomaking have collapsed into one single practice. Rather than the originator of my work, academic writing is now the last phase of my process, when I finally try to put into words my initial research question and to articulate the insights I think my video produces about it. I like to think of my recent video essays as research diaries or research tales. Starting from a pre-existing piece of media (a photograph, an online video, an experimental film), they narrate my research process in a semi-fictionalized way, exploring both the stakes of the studied image and the epistemological, ethical, and political implications of my studying it.

I am still in the process of finding the most productive theoretical framework to establish these videos of mine as works of research. I have found references to “situated knowledges,”¹ to “performative research,”² as well as to the practice of autoethnography³ to be very useful in that regard—and the publication of my work in peer-reviewed journals such as *[in]Transition* seem to confirm that my video essays (or films?) can indeed be perceived as legitimate academic research. But I also acknowledge that my own approach to making scholarly video essays is quite specific and certainly doesn't allow for the extrapolation of a comprehensive definition of what a scholarly video essay can be. What general criteria can I then draw from my experience to contribute to such a definition?

As a filmmaker and as a researcher, I have always been less interested in studying the films themselves, as I was attracted to exploring the spectatorial experiences that they may occasion. This perhaps explains why, for this essay, I would like to focus on what scholarly video essays *feel like*.

The Temporal Constraint of the Video Essay, and its Consequences

As incidental as it may seem at first, I think the most critical feature of the spectatorial experience offered by a scholarly video essay is determined by its fixed pace and duration.

When I read a scholarly text, I expect a high density of information and concepts; I will read slowly, make notes, read most sentences several times, underline key words, go back to the introduction as often as necessary until I feel that I have comprehended the author's main argument. More often than not, I will write down in the margins of the page my personal responses to the ideas that I find the most stimulating—or the least convincing. When I'm done, the text (be it a printed book or a digital PDF) will have been visibly modified by my reading. Video essays, on the other hand, flow from start to finish.⁴ I can generally press pause, but most videos don't invite me to. On most platforms, I can't annotate the video. When I'm done watching, the video is unchanged from my viewing. The best that may have happened is that *I* was changed (my opinions, the state of my knowledge, my feelings about a certain topic). In other words, I am by default passive.

I am not the first one to argue that the passivity invited by the cinematic apparatus doesn't encourage the spectator to be critical of the ideas that the film presents to her, nor to analyze the audiovisual techniques with which these ideas are presented.⁵ In a scholarly context, this is all the more problematic that images and sounds have other seductions than written words. Images have a form of obviousness that requires specific contextualization, and possibly deconstruction, in order for them to be used as the basis for a rigorous rhetorical argument. As anyone who has ever made a comparative split-screen video knows, there are fewer more manipulative techniques than presenting “evidence” in a visual form. And sounds tend to remain unnoticed, exerting their subconscious work on the viewer's mind and body—increasing the argument's impact, but not necessarily its veracity.

Therefore, arguments presented in the form of images and sounds should require extra care both from the author and from the viewer. But this is where the issue of pacing and duration appears:

because of the video's fixed timing, the spectator often has hardly enough time to process one concept or concrete example before the editing of the video has moved on to the next point, the next image, the next sound. And so on, until the end of the video is reached by a spectator who may feel moved, stimulated, bored—I for one generally feel intellectually overwhelmed and a little anxious, and I am typically unable to even recall the structure of the argument that was presented to me. With any other video work, I wouldn't mind: I can appreciate an aesthetic ride without considering where it takes me. But a *scholarly* video essay?

At this point, it might help to define what the adjective “scholarly” stands for. I have come to understand scholarly texts to be defined by their capacity to not only produce new knowledge about a specific topic, but also acknowledge their own limitations and invite critical responses from their reader. With regards to the argument developed in my previous paragraph, it might seem that I want to argue that these requirements cannot be met by video essays because the audiovisual format would forbid all forms of criticality. But of course this is not my opinion—or I wouldn't be producing video essays as part of my PhD.

For me, the question that was asked by the editors of this journal issue (“What is a scholarly video essay?”) can therefore be rephrased as such: how can video essayists design, despite the temporal constraints of the form within which they work, a spectatorial position from which their viewers can be critical of their arguments and methods?

A Portrait of the Scholar as an Experience Designer

One very recognizable way that researchers have historically allowed for their texts to be criticized is by the inclusion of references and sources. The references not only demonstrate the author's knowledge of her field of research, but also allow her readers to refer back to her source material, to engage further with her analysis and discuss her way of appropriating and responding to pre-existing arguments. While certain scholarly video essays have tried to adopt the same approach, I argue that this isn't the most productive way of addressing the aforementioned challenge—because, again, of the form's fixed duration. When one does not have enough time to process an argument, one or several references won't help. Because the video format comes with a temporal constraint, what could appear as a way to invite a critical response from the viewer tends to become a signifier for

authority that, in my experience as a spectator of such video essays, can be more intimidating than inviting or productive. That quotes, sources, and citations should be part of the written texts that usually accompany scholarly video essays in the context of an academic publication is of course another matter, but this isn't the subject of this article.

So what other techniques are available for video essayists to prompt their spectators to distance themselves from their arguments? Many have been explored—interruptions, repetitions, hesitant or dialogical narration—and there are probably many more to explore yet. Generally speaking, I would say that the scholarly video essays that inspire me the most are those that were written and edited so as to accompany the thinking process of their spectators while they watch. This may be done with or without words. These video essays feel processual: not in the sense that they don't reach any conclusion, but in that they care more about whether the spectator can actually follow what is said or shown and take time to make up her own opinion about it, than about the demonstration of the author's expertise or the presentation of her final results. It also doesn't necessarily mean that these videos follow the original research process of their makers. In that regard, I am not convinced, as we sometimes hear, that video essays would be an instinctually more processual form than written texts. I for one produce and process my thoughts when I write as much if not more than when I edit a video. All the video essays I have produced so far (and especially the desktop documentaries) have actually involved an enormous amount of rewriting, staging, and re-enacting of a sometimes long gone “original” research moment. The years I've worked towards the completion of my PhD have seen me grow less and less convinced that research should be about the process of the researcher. Conversely, I am more and more interested in the works of researchers who acknowledge that if any knowledge is to be produced thanks to their endeavours, it will always be produced in the mind and the body of the person who will try to engage with their productions.

As I write these words, I wonder if all scholars, independently from their field of research and from the medium within which they work, could perhaps consider the type of lived experience that they want to design for the people who will try and access their work. A sociologist whom I admire very much once told me that as an academic writer, she considered it to be her job to write and rewrite her text until it would enable her reader to understand and critique her arguments with as little effort as possible. This being said, I can also imagine circumstances in which an argument would require opacity for its full implications to be perceived. This is perhaps where I reveal myself to be more of an artist than an academic (and does it sufficiently illustrate how processual written texts can be that

I would come to such a realization by writing this article?). I find these formal questions to be equally, if not more, exciting than the contents of any given research. But isn't this precisely one of the things that artistic research (or practice-based research, or "recherche-cr ation") could bring into academia: a greater consideration for the embodied experience of engaging with theory?

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1. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599.
 2. Catherine Grant, "The audiovisual essay as performative research," *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016); Brad Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research," *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy* 118, no. 1 (February 2006): 98–106.
 3. Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (November 2010).
 4. There are a few examples of non-linear scholarly video essays, such as "Don't Look Now: Paradoxes of Suture" by Shane Denson, published in *[in]Transition. Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, 3.4, 2016, <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2016/10/06/don-t-look-now-paradoxes-suture>. But here I will focus on the video essays that embrace the constraints of the cinematic form (single-screen, non-interactive, etc.).
 5. There is a long history of debates about the passivity of the cinema spectator, and the ideological implications of the cinematic apparatus, notably in response to Jean-Louis Baudry's foundational article "Le dispositif," *Pers e - Portail des revues scientifiques en SHS, Communications* 23, no. 1 (1975): 56–72.