

Film criticism, film scholarship and the video essay

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This research note examines the particular role played by film critics and scholars in a converging and evolving digital media form. Of all the many developments in the short history of film criticism and scholarship, the video essay has the greatest potential to challenge the now historically located text-based dominance of the appraisal and interpretation of film and its contextual cultures. The video essay or, as Catherine Grant has termed it, the ‘*inter alia* ... audiovisual essay and visual essay’,¹ is essentially a short analytical film about films or film culture, and over the course of the last decade it has become a term that serves as a general metonym for video criticism about the cinematic arts and, to a lesser extent, television. Its form, however, has a distinctive prehistory that lies beyond contemporary moving-image culture and deserves particular consideration. Whilst recent empirical data suggests that many professional film critics have never worked with the video essay, have seen few examples of it, and/or are confused by what exactly it constitutes,² many others *do* work with the form and are therefore able to offer mixed evaluations of its specific potential. At the same time, film scholars generally have taken to the form much more quickly, even though there remain significant barriers to entry in terms of skill sets and various legal uncertainties. This research note will thus chart the potential and the limitations of the video essay through a detailed survey of the opinions of major UK and North American film critics and scholars, some of whom, as demonstrated by Kevin B. Lee’s recent article ‘Best video essays of 2014’,³ have now become accomplished pioneers and exemplary video essayists in their own right.

According to Christian Keathley, the video essay now dominates much of the discussion about film criticism in the digital age. Keathley argues that at

¹ Catherine Grant, ‘Curator’s note’, *[in]Transition*, 4 March 2014, <<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/2014/03/04/intransition-editors-introduction>> accessed 6 July 2015.

² The views of film critics here come from qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observation with thirty critics at the Edinburgh International Film Festival 2011 and the Toronto International Film Festival 2011, which contributed to Christopher McWhirter, ‘Film criticism in the digital age’ (PhD thesis [embargoed]: University of Glasgow, 2014), <<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/5165/>> accessed 6 July 2015.

³ Kevin B. Lee, ‘Best video essays of 2014’, *Fandor*, 29 December 2014, <<https://www.fandor.com/keyframe/the-best-video-essays-of-2014>> accessed 6 July 2015.

- 4 Christian Keathley, 'La camera-stylo: notes on video criticism and cinephilia', in Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (eds), *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 176–91; Kevin B. Lee and Volker Pantenburg, 'Film studies in motion: a web series', *International Short Film Festival Oberhausen* (2012), <<http://www.kurzfilmtage.de/en/festival/looking-back/2012/podium/film-studies-in-motion/>> accessed 7 July 2015; Girish Shambu, 'Video essays', 27 February 2012, <<http://girishshambu.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/video-essays.html>> accessed 7 July 2015; Donaro Totaro, 'Film writing and "Sturgeon's Law"', *Offscreen*, vol. 14, no. 6 (2010), <http://offscreen.com/view/film_sturgeons_law> accessed 7 July 2015.
- 5 Jonathan Rosenbaum, in interview with the author, 4 November 2009.
- 6 Mike Stoklasa, 'Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace', *Red Letter Media* (2007), <<http://redlettermedia.com/plinkett/star-wars/star-wars-episode-1-the-phantom-menace/>> accessed 7 July 2015; PrimusInterPares, 'Tarkovsky's Mirror set to Arvo Pärt's Mirror in the Mirror', *YouTube*, 24 August 2008, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dweiGvjxHs>> accessed 7 July 2015.
- 7 Kevin B. Lee, 'What radical filmmaking really looks like', *Fandor*, 22 August 2013, <<http://www.fandor.com/blog/video-what-radical-filmmaking-really-looks-like/comment-page-1>> accessed 7 July 2015.
- 8 Christian Keathley, 'Pass the salt', *Vimeo* (2011), <<https://vimeo.com/23266798>> accessed 7 July 2015. The subject is also covered in Christian Keathley, 'Pass the salt ... and other bits of business', a contribution to the 'Small Parts, Small Players' dossier, *Screen*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2011), pp. 105–13.

present it is the most common form of multimedia film criticism, a point echoed by others who recognize its considerable growth over the past five years.⁴ While celebrated critics like Jonathan Rosenbaum advocate on its behalf – he believes that 'some of the very, very best film criticism that is being done now, is being done on video'⁵ – there has also been an increase in sites willing to host these initiatives, such as *indieWIRE*'s Press Play, *Fandor*'s Keyframe, the Museum of the Moving Image in New York's Moving Image Source, and the Audiovisual project curated by Grant that is active on both *YouTube* and *Vimeo* channels.

Video essays are essentially short critical films about cinema, films or artists in one or a series of online clips that usually last no more than fifteen minutes per video, even if these clips are broken into two or more parts. Having said this, there may well be a measured evolution of their length with the lifting of formal restraints such as *YouTube*'s ten-minute maximum for uploads, and the growth of capacity and bandwidth alongside optimized compression. If the compound noun 'video essay' has only recently been adopted by film culture, and if in the microhistory of the web it has still not made it into the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the form it signifies certainly has a discernible ancestry, with the notion of the 'video essay' serving as an umbrella term for everything from Mike Stoklasa's epic and crude critiques of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1999–2005) to scenes from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo/Mirror* (1975) edited to Arvo Pärt's musical composition *Spiegel im Spiegel*.⁶

It might be helpful here to discuss two exemplary instances of the form before proceeding further. Given that this research note seeks to discuss the video essay in relation to film criticism and film scholarship, it is appropriate to select one example from a film critic and one from a film scholar. As an example of the first, Lee is not only more prolific than any other essayist but, due to his large output, it is possible to track his videos on the spectrum of aesthetic and formal critiques to more recent politically motivated works that question the purpose of film in the twenty-first century. This is evident in Lee's work *What Radical Filmmaking Really Looks Like* from 2013.⁷ Here, without narration, Lee achieves a juxtaposition of and commentary on the supposedly radicalized commercial genre film and the ability of film to capture and influence politics. He accomplishes this in a five-minute video by detailing a short history of resistance to oppression, as well as the transformative influence of moving images, with reference to films about anticolonialism, Bloody Sunday, Mohawks in Canada, Vietnam and more. He manages to fulfil one of the key characteristics of the form, which is to bring new information to audiences on little-known films in an engaging way.

Keathley also presents new information to the viewer, but this time by way of a relatively well-known film. In *Pass the Salt* from 2011,⁸ Keathley narrates over footage as he tells us about a scene that he 'can't stop thinking about' from Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959). In this US courtroom/crime drama starring James Stewart, the scene in question is one in which Stewart's character has lunch (a bottle of beer and a hardboiled

egg) with his lawyer colleague and friend at a roadside lunch stand. In the background is an industrial overhead crane and the occasional passing train. Stewart's character peels the shell from his egg while discussing the possibility of taking on a legal case. His colleague, who has already peeled his own egg, shakes some salt on it. What follows mimics the film itself, as Keathley builds a case for his construal of the scene. He begins his analysis by focusing on the salt-shaker before moving to a detailed interpretation of the soundtrack and the background noise in the scene. He informs us that the film is set in the town of Iron City with its famous railroad yard, where trains are loaded by the crane-shovel with the iron ore that is mined nearby. He draws out the link between the salt and the iron, discussing the machinery of the legal system and Preminger's lawyer father. He then offers a historical perspective on ancient Chinese legal history represented symbolically in each of the characters – a history founded on a document called 'The discourse of salt and iron', which again offers the viewer an interesting analysis and the unearthing of new and, in this particular instance, archival research information.

indieWIRE's chief critic Eric Kohn has remarked that although 'video essays are not exactly a new form', the 'way that they can be created in a very short space of time and spread across the internet is certainly new'.⁹ It is thus appropriate that current definitions are broad and nonrestrictive. Damon Smith has coined the phrases 'Standard Video Criticism' – which he claims is no more than an authoritative voiceover paired with footage – and 'Nonstandard Video Criticism' – which he describes as reliant on the tools of cinema beyond the film under consideration.¹⁰ Keathley provides a more detailed continuum between two different registers: the explanatory, which is analytical and language-based, and the poetic, which is expressive and battles against language with a collage of images and sounds.¹¹ Lee, along with the scholar Volker Pantenburg, has organized specific themes under which the current types of video essays in existence may be discussed in terms of their content. These range from auteurist projects to obsessive pieces on a single scene or remixes of found footage.¹²

The uncertainty some film critics feel over what exactly constitutes a video essay may, in part, be due to the varied trajectories of the previous media that have shaped the form. The most common assertion by critics is that the video essay shares an affinity with the essay film – a term, according to Smith, coined by the avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter in 1940. But even the essay film encompasses a wide range of examples.¹³ As Timothy Corrigan has argued, since Chris Marker and Alain Resnais created their landmark essay film *Les Statues meurent aussi/Statues also Die* in 1953, the sheer breadth of films which may be labelled as such, from Werner Herzog's *Burden of Dreams* (1982) and Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) to Slavoj Žižek's *The Pervert's Guide to the Cinema* (2006) and Banksy's *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010), precludes adequate definition.¹⁴ The point remains, though, that while the essay film might take anything as its subject, the video essay itself only has the subject of film (or television) at its centre.

⁹ Eric Kohn, in interview with the author, 9 September 2011.

¹⁰ Damon Smith, 'Eyes Wide Shut: notes toward a new video criticism', *Project: New Cinephilia*, 10 June 2011, <<http://projectcinephilia.mubi.com/2011/06/10/eyes-wide-shut-notes-toward-a-new-video-criticism>> accessed 7 July 2015.

¹¹ Keathley, 'La camera-stylo', pp. 176–91.

¹² Lee and Pantenburg, 'Film studies in motion: a web series'.

¹³ Smith, 'Eyes Wide Shut'.

¹⁴ Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011). The chief blogger for Criticwire (part of *indieWIRE*), Sam Adams, has compiled a useful resource of many essay films: Sam Adams, 'Watch (almost) every film from Kevin Lee's provocative video essay', *indieWIRE*, 18 July 2013, <<http://blogs.indiewire.com/criticwire/kevin-lee-essay-films-bfi-chris-marker-los-angeles-plays-itself>> accessed 7 July 2015.

There are other developments from cinema history which link the video essay to past practice. The 'do-it-yourself' filmmaking style of video essays – particularly those using original footage – can be traced back to Dziga Vertov at the end of the 1920s. It is perhaps not incidental that in 2012, more than eighty years after its original release, *Chelovek s kino-apparatom/ Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) was named one of the top ten films of all time by *Sight and Sound*. As more amateurs than ever before are experimenting with film and video, this work of nonfiction mixing documentary and avant-garde techniques also mimics the spectrum of content and form that the video essay itself covers. That not all video essays use original footage, however, reveals yet another antecedent, this time in remix culture. Remixed footage has been part of experimental cinema and contemporary art for a number of decades. Lee and Pantenburg, for example, trace remix culture back to Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* in 1936, while Jonathan McIntosh's 'A history of subversive remix video before YouTube', highlights thirty political video mash-ups since World War II.¹⁵ Lee and Pantenburg argue that most of this audiovisual legacy remains overlooked or locked away in archives. They pick up Grant's term 'videographic film studies' and apply it to television of the 1970s, such as the filmmaker Robert Gardner's *The Screening Room* (WCVB, ABC affiliate, 1973–80).¹⁶ This prehistory has been reiterated by Kohn:

If you look at documentaries about film history or about a certain filmmaker that have been airing on PBS over the years, I think the roots are there and also in clip analyses in classrooms. In the ways that in an academic paper you're supposed to describe what a filmmaker does before you can delve into the meaning and the analysis, this is also something that I think video essays do.¹⁷

A key difference is that in creating a video essay today, the critic or scholar has no need of a television studio or crew; they alone can be the expert author of the work, as they most often are in the written text, even though, of course, the act of 'doing it alone' may require the acquisition of the same specific media skills. The prominent film critic Jim Hoberman has been creating film mash-ups for over forty years, but in this he remains a rarity.

Although editing footage became democratized with the introduction of video technology in the 1970s and 1980s, some of the earliest pedagogical and practical classes on video essays at the start of the twenty-first century allowed students only to add commentary to scenes instead of manipulating the image. Janet Bergstrom, reflecting on her first audiovisual essay seminar at UCLA in 2004, comments that 'We had no technology at all aside from a DVD player and a tape recorder. We didn't have access to computer facilities or software or a tech assistant.'¹⁸ Such classroom pedagogy is made possible by the ability to manipulate the image in other ways, however, by simply pausing or jumping to specific shots or sequences as afforded by the DVD – a defining trait of film scholarship in the digital era.¹⁹ The idea of accompanying the images with narration mirrors what is now

15 Jonathan McIntosh, 'A history of subversive remix video before YouTube: thirty political video mashups made between World War II and 2005', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 9 (2012), <<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/10>> accessed 7 July 2015.

16 Lee and Pantenburg, 'Film studies in motion: a web series'.

17 Eric Kohn, in interview with the author, 9 September 2011.

18 Matthias Stork and Janet Bergstrom, 'Film studies with high production values: an interview with Janet Bergstrom on making and teaching audiovisual essays', *Frames Cinema Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012), <<http://framescinema-journal.com/article/film-studies-with-high-production-values>> accessed 7 July 2015.

19 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

²⁰ Bryant Frazer, 'Permanent ghosts: cinephilia in the age of the internet and video. Essay 5', *Senses of Cinema*, no. 5 (2000), <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/cinephilia-special-feature-part-ii/cine5/>> accessed 7 July 2015.

²¹ Mark Cousins, in interview with the author, 8 June 2011.

²² Damon Smith, in interview with the author, 21 June 2011.

²³ Mark Cousins, in interview with the author, 8 June 2011

taken to be commonplace in bonus features such as DVD commentaries. These commentaries themselves have slowly evolved from laserdisc special editions in the 1980s such as Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), in which the film's director and editor, Thelma Schoonmaker, discusses their work together.²⁰ Other contemporary analogous forms to the video essay produced by film critics include Christian Marclay's *Telephones* (1995) or *The Clock* (2011), Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992), Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) and, most recently, Mark Cousins's ambitious alternative history of world cinema in *The Story of Film* (2011). Cousins himself acknowledges the relationship between his film and the video essay via one of its antecedents in the DVD commentary:

I think of *TSOF* as just one big video essay, basically. And I think that one other area that's relevant to this idea of the essay is the director's commentary. What I have in effect done with *TSOF* is a commentary, even though I didn't make all these films that I'm talking about, I've done a commentary over the top of them. Only half way through this process did I realize that it's the DVD extras director's commentary or actor's commentary that has influenced what I'm doing.²¹

As I have mentioned, two major impediments to the continued growth of the video essay are the lack of appropriate skill sets (which encompass more than just technical know-how) and the various legal complexities concerning the repurposing of intellectual property. In creating a narrated video, essayists often have to reveal something otherwise hidden in written text: their physical voice. Additionally, some professional critics will know nothing about how to create what they critique because, unlike the case with film studies scholars, the mechanisms of filmmaking – how to establish shot compositions, editing techniques, and so on – are often considered inessential to the critics' quotidian function. Unsurprisingly, then, the best examples of video essays are from critics with a background in filmmaking or experience in television production, such as Steve Santos, Matt Zoller Seitz, Kevin B. Lee or Jeff Reichert at *Reverse Shot*. Smith comments that this form is in an 'embryonic' state and that 'critics are critics, meaning they write. But now they have to teach themselves video production skills. And in a sense, pick up a little on the language of cinema.'²² Noel Murray, a former AV Club critic now at *The Dissolve*, has commented that technophobia is the reason why video essays are not used more often, claiming that not every critic is technologically inclined. This is a point echoed by both the Canadian film critic Adam Nayman, talking about his own skills, and the *Boston Phoenix* critic Gerald Peary, who claims that a younger generation would have to show him how to do it. Cousins also contributes to this line of argument, saying that

the reason why most critics don't do video essays is because they don't have the training. They don't know how to edit and I think most of them wouldn't know how to source. I'd be surprised if Bradshaw or Rosenbaum or any of those people knew how to do that.²³

24 Kevin B. Lee and Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'Orson Welles at 100', *Filmmaker Magazine*, 6 May 2015, <<http://filmmakermagazine.com/94185-watch-jonathan-rosenbaum-on-orson-welles-at-100/>> accessed 7 July 2015.

25 Interviews with the author, 2011.

26 Nick James, in interview with the author, 13 July 2011.

27 Jonathan Rosenbaum, in interview with the author, 4 November 2009.

28 Ibid.

29 Kevin B. Lee, in interview with the author, 10 September 2011.

30 Damon Smith, in interview with the author, 21 June 2011.

Cousins is correct in that Rosenbaum did need Lee's technical expertise to jointly produce a number of visual essays, most recently with 'Orson Welles at 100'.²⁴ Additionally, the editors of *Cineaste* and *Sight and Sound* both point to a lack of resources and technical know-how as the reason why these institutions have not developed more video essay work.²⁵ Nick James, for instance, has commented that:

We'd need to have much more resources than we have currently to create video essays. It's something that we were really excited about and wanted to do a lot of when we brought Nick Bradshaw in, the online editor. In fact we've discovered that editing things just takes up way too much of his time out of the equation. So I think video essays will have to be from people who do their own editing and then submit it to us.²⁶

This type of publishing has happened, as some video essays by Lee and others have been published on the *Sight and Sound* website, but the content does not seem to be growing as strongly as it has on sites curated in the USA.

Many legal complications exist concerning intellectual property and copyright, which can lead to critics and publications remaining ill-informed and thus perturbed by the possibility of being sued if they do not seek expensive rights clearances for clips. Opinions from UK and North American critics on this matter may be broadly grouped into two categories: those who are unaware of their rights as cultural critics or are afraid/overly respectful of copyright; those who are pioneers in the use of material under Fair Use or Fair Dealing conventions. Rosenbaum argues that critics have nothing to fear from working with copyrighted material;²⁷ with the exception of Cousins, the critics who seem most at ease with potentially creating video essays under Fair Use are predominantly North American. Perhaps this disparity exists because most critics from this region either know far more about the form and have worked with it in some capacity, or because Fair Use is more firmly established in the USA than Fair Dealing is in the UK. Rosenbaum argues that individual critics have so little money that the industry would not pursue them legally,²⁸ and Lee notes that there is now a 'tidal wave of activity' in favour of using such material in video essays.²⁹ Lee is especially knowledgeable on the subject, as he had 300-plus minutes of his video essays removed for copyright infringements from *YouTube*, only to have them reinstated a week later after he had argued the Fair Use Defence. For Smith, the line between criticism and theft is a pretty visible one:

The Centre for Social Media is really, really supportive of Fair Use and it's run by two lawyers who work in Washington. They know the law, they know the system. They know that these usages are covered under the law. If you're repurposing something; if you're judicious in the amount that you use and there is some component to it that can be understood as essayistic, no problem.³⁰

In most cases, the two positions taken on the use of copyrighted material in video essays are not only poles apart but are often identifiably linked

- 31 Andrew McWhirter, 'Film criticism in the twenty-first century: six schools', *Journalism Practice*, forthcoming 2015, available at this permanent link, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2015.1051372>> accessed 9 July 2015.
- 32 Steve Anderson, 'Fair use and media studies in the digital age', *Frames Cinema Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012), <<http://framescinemajournal.com/article/fair-use-and-media-studies-in-the-digital-age/>> accessed 7 July 2015.
- 33 Roger Ebert, 'Film criticism is dying? Not online', *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 January 2011, <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703583404576080392163051376>> accessed 7 July 2015.
- 34 Grant 'Curator's note'.
- 35 David Bordwell, 'FILM ART: AN INTRODUCTION reaches a milestone, with help from the Criterion Collection', *Davidbordwell.net*, 16 March 2012, <<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/03/16/film-art-an-introduction-reaches-a-milestone-with-help-from-the-criterion-collection/>> accessed 9 July 2015.
- 36 Leah Churner, 'Certified copy: film preservation in the age of new cinephilia', *Project: New Cinephilia*, 8 June 2011, <<http://projectcinephilia.mubi.com/2011/06/08/certified-copy-film-preservation-in-the-age-of-new-cinephilia>> accessed 7 July 2015; Catherine Grant 'Garden of forking paths? Hitchcock's BLACKMAILs – a real-time comparison', *Film Studies for Free*, 12 March 2012, <<http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/garden-of-forking-paths-hitchcocks.html>> accessed 7 July 2015.

either to critics with ties to the populist realm or writers with less visibly commercial pressures.³¹ The former group might be afraid of being penalized on either an individual or an institutional basis, while the latter may attempt to educate and set precedents by encouraging more usage in what are largely untested legal waters. This is a fear, according to Steve Anderson, that has been associated with the use of digital material and audiovisual work in academia since the turn of the millennium.³²

In recent years audiovisual criticism has been conducted by pioneering individuals as well as the more forward-thinking institutions. Since Matt Zoller Seitz began the Press Play blog in 2011 there has been a steady flow of content emerging, with over 200 video essays now in the archive and more being added each week. Lee himself claims to make around fifty essays annually. The sort of video criticism that may be most pertinently labelled 'essayistic' is often an authored project, because these works are created with high production values and the producers are generally proud of what they are exhibiting. There are numerous prominent professional film critics working in this way, from Jim Emerson at *The Chicago Sun-Times*, to freelancers such as Seitz, Karina Longworth, Tag Gallagher and Steve Boone, as well as Lee. These individuals are, in the words of the late Roger Ebert, 'New Media to their bones'.³³

However, alongside this handful of film critics and a growing school of amateur critics and cinephiles, it is largely academics and scholars who have advocated the potential of video essays in either their practice or research. These cinephile academics – including Grant, Keathley, Bordwell, Thompson, Nicole Brenez, Girish Shambu and Nicholas Rombes, as well as authors such as Masha Tupitsyn – are pioneers in the field in terms of either advocacy or praxis, or both. Grant contends that most of these video essays are actually produced outside of academia due to 'the strictures of written academic discourse'.³⁴ But a workshop on video essays entitled 'Video Essays: Film Scholarship's Emergent Form', at the 2012 Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) conference, is further evidence that the form is now receiving serious academic attention. The tenth edition of *Film Art: An Introduction* has a video essay project attached to it in the form of an online partnership with The Criterion Collection – albeit that the creation of those essays was outsourced to a professional filmmaker rather than completed by the authors themselves.³⁵

In this sense the video essay reminds us, with its deployment of the convergence of film and digital media, that the moving image as an institutional term now testifies to a much wider and more complex definition of what cinema is, and in so doing may reposition those who have spent their entire careers studying it.³⁶ In some ways film studies has embraced the video essay far earlier than film criticism. As noted, Bergstrom has been teaching a class on the video essay at UCLA since winter 2004. While she acknowledges the work currently being done online with video essays, she also highlights the necessary connections between contemporary developments and the work of people like Marker and Andersen. She also aims to remain dedicated to what she calls 'old technology' in the Digital

37 Stork and Bergstrom, 'Film studies with high production values'.

Lab with laserdisc and multi-standard VHS players.³⁷ At the very beginning of the twenty-first century it would have been difficult to predict the recent trend in academic film studies journals devoting entire issues to the possibilities of video criticism, as the inaugural edition of *Frames Cinema Journal* did. Published by the postgraduate community in the Film Studies Department at the University of St Andrews, the opening edition, entitled 'Film and Moving Image Studies Re-Born Digital?', was guest-curated by Grant and published work by notable contributors such as Keathley, Lee, Thompson and Adrian Martin, among many others. Other online-only journals such as *Audiovisual Thinking*, published by the University of Copenhagen, encourage submissions only in multimedia form from all fields of study. The journal itself makes use of the expertise of academics and thinkers in the fields of audiovisuality, communication and media; it represents an effort to redress the balance between written and audiovisual scholarship.

The visual form as a mode of learning is something of which, as a Gestalt psychologist, Rudolph Arnheim would have approved. Laura Mulvey discusses how various digital tools significantly enhance film scholars' research and teaching. Aside from her own influence on video essayists – for example in the albeit rudimentary 'Laura's Mulvey's male gaze BOND edition'³⁸ – she recognizes the most pertinent developments in film studies as new ways of seeing films that were impossible before we were afforded the widespread ability to slow down frames, pause or even manipulate the image in other ways.³⁹ Video essays also connect with the expanding subsector of film studies that looks at nontheatrical film history. Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson have recently shown how education and film have coalesced throughout history in a variety of ordinary situations, from factories to advertising.⁴⁰ Marshall Poe has moreover argued provocatively that every monograph should be a film, on the basis that reading is not a particularly natural act for humans; the logic here is that an academic or sophisticated work of intellect might appeal to a broader audience if it was something one simply had to look at.⁴¹

As any film student from the 1980s onwards will testify, clips are essential to the understanding of film through a combination of the observation of techniques on screen and their description and critical contextualization. Perhaps one should not be too surprised at how easily academics have taken to the form, given the history of the lecturer's voice through technologically enabled pedagogic practices: screen grabs on Power Points, embedded clips, visual comparisons and narrations, interpretations, annotations, highlighting and sometimes even overwriting texts on slide projections and overheads. Online film studies sites such as Transit have taken up a curatorial role for video essays. There is also the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic film and moving image studies, *[in]Transition* – a collaboration between MediaCommons and the SCMS's official publication, *Cinema Journal* – edited by Grant, Keathley and Drew Morton. It is worth highlighting this particular initiative because its purpose is to redress the balance between the validation and recognition

38 Knacal Ceres, 'Laura Mulvey's male gaze BOND edition', *YouTube*, 21 November 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHN2ApYT0w>> accessed 7 July 2015.

39 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*.

40 Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (eds), *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). For an instructive insight into cinema as an educational tool outside the classroom, see also Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron and Dan Streible (eds), *Learning with the Lights off: Educational Film in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

41 Marshall Poe, 'Every movie a monograph', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 March 2012, <<http://chronicle.com/article/Every-Monograph-a-Movie/131106/>> accessed 15 July 2015.

accorded to written scholarship compared with that attributed to audiovisual scholarship, much in the way *Audiovisual Thinking* implicitly attempts to do. Key difficulties remain, however, when considering academic publishing standards in new media environments, such as the journal accepting work that has been published elsewhere. This is something that would be unacceptable in most other text-focused academic journals.

As many scholars who work with and promote the video essay will affirm, we have not yet reached the high watermark of the form, because even if it has a traceable ancestry we are still in a developmental phase. No usurping of the written form of film criticism is to be expected, thanks to an increasing trend towards having the visual essay and its complementary text (even if this is just a written transcript) appear in the same space of publication. Although it may be linked to the essay film, remix culture, public service television documentaries on cinema and DVD commentaries, the importance of the video essay as a metonym for video film criticism, more than the criticism of any other art, cannot be overestimated. Alongside notable film critics willing to take the risk and acquire the necessary skills, many cinephile scholars are now at the forefront of the most competent examples of video essays in practice and pedagogy. In their discussions about the functionality of the form, they are helping to drive forward the growing number of examples that we see today – even if there remain substantial barriers to entry. Cinematic resources are now being deployed in order to critique the very medium itself, and this has implications that are not yet fully understood. Now that video essays are being produced in larger numbers with higher standards of research and technical expertise, and now that they are being supported by an intellectually enthusiastic discourse from within film and media studies, their creative production has, arguably, grown even more sophisticated. Of course, as this very journal continues to testify, the written word still dominates; even if, as Lev Manovich has suggested, our culture is beginning to be subsumed by images.⁴² That said, the video essay is clearly one element of the digital revolution that genuinely offers the possibility of a transformative change to film criticism and film scholarship for amateurs, professionals, students and educators, alike.

⁴² Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).