

Independent Studies: Videographic Criticism

Introduction: Discussing Film in Film Language

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As a scholar of film, one can sometimes struggle with writing about film, as one never quite captures on paper what is seen on the screen. One way to overcome this problem is to find new ways to engage with films academically, for example by using film's own language: sound and images. Some students of the North American Studies master program at Leibniz University Hannover explored exactly this kind of engagement with film in an independent studies class. Kathleen Loock taught the seminar "Videographic Criticism" for the first time in the winter semester 2021/22 (with the help of student assistants Lida Shams-Mostofi and myself), and invited participants to engage with one film over the course of the semester with the end goal of producing a scholarly video essay. Most of the final video essay projects are published in this issue of *In Progress*. This introduction contextualizes these videographic works, as it briefly presents the scholarly practice of videographic criticism, addresses the principles and structure that guided our learning in class, and lastly, of course, also introduces the video essays featured here.

As Jason Mittell writes, "videographic criticism is the expression of scholarly ideas via moving images and sound in audiovisual form." In other words, videographic criticism produces videos (with sounds and images) – not written pieces – that aim to convey scholarly arguments. As an audiovisual form, however, videographic criticism includes more than just essayistic formats like the ones included here. While the latter are often produced in academic film, television, and media studies contexts, scholars like Drew Morton maintain that videographic criticism also includes more poetic projects and/or works that are not based on existing films or television series (131). After all, this form of working with, and creating, audiovisual material is, as Chatherine Grant puts it, generally "creative, critical, and performative" – leading to a broad spectrum of works that range from forms reminiscent of a lecture or written essay to very free, creative, imaginative, or figurative videos. In my experience, practicing videographic criticism is especially fulfilling when doing film analysis because one can use film language – such as the elements of music, editing, pacing, or color – when making arguments about films, oftentimes with the added bonus that one can show exactly those aspects one aims to analyze. Additionally, the process of working with film material in the editing software in itself has a "potential to enable discovery" (Grizzaffi), since cutting, re-editing, overlaying visual effects, or changing speeds – among many other methods – can lead to sudden observations about the filmic material at hand that watching in itself might not reveal.

Yet, as Mittell and Christian Keathley rightfully observe, to stop writing and start producing video essays requires some technical knowledge about video editing software that many (film) scholars simply do not possess or learn through the usual university education ("Introduction").

Mittell and Keathley teach upcoming scholars how to ‘do’ videographic criticism based on the principles that “one learns by doing” – meaning that participants in their seminars start creating short videos and using the software immediately – and that “formal parameters lead to content discoveries” (“Scholarship”). According to their experiences in teaching videographic criticism, “[they] have found that producing work according to often arbitrary formal parameters will reveal something about your object that would be hard to discover through more typical analytical means” (“Scholarship”). Our own instructor, Kathleen Loock, is a graduate from Mittell and Keathley’s “Scholarship in Sound & Image” workshop that takes place at Middlebury College in Vermont, and adapted the “Middlebury Model” to teach videographic criticism in Hannover.

In practice, our seminar walked us through the exercises used at the “Scholarship in Sound & Image” workshop. This meant that all participants were required to choose one movie at the beginning of the semester and keep working with this material for all exercises. Our first exercise of the semester was a “Videographic PechaKucha” assignment that required us to combine “10 video clips of precisely six seconds each, coupled with a continuous minute-long audio segment” from our chosen films (Keathley and Mittell, “Scholarship”). An important step before moving to the next exercise was to then get together to watch and discuss our PechaKucha exercises, first in smaller groups and then with the entire class. This pattern was then repeated for the subsequent exercises. In this fashion, we also made a voice-over exercise (non-academic voice-over text over a running scene), a videographic epigraph (unrelated on-screen text quotations over a scene with some added effects), and lastly a multi-screen composition for which we could also use the films our classmates were working with. Only after going through these assignments, we developed ideas, arguments, and a structure for our final video essay projects – starting with abstract trailers which were then successively expanded into longer videos.

As the course progressed, we learned how to use the editing software DaVinci Resolve and how to overcome a number of technical problems – and, of course, we also developed a deeper understanding of the movies we worked with throughout the semester. We screened our final projects in a Zoom event that was attended by many of our friends and family, in addition to fellow students and faculty members tuning in and enjoying the diverse projects produced during the course.

The students’ final video essay projects are featured in this issue of *In Progress*. They vary in tone, length, use of voice-over or on-screen-text, among many other things, and thus offer great examples of what videographic criticism can look like. Firstly, Sofie Hilbrand’s project investigates the mechanics of filmic point-of-view narration in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2004). In the next project, Can Ulucan engages with ideas of war and colonialism in the science fiction film *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015). Staying within the same genre, my own video essay then positions *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) as a slow and contemplative approach to science fiction film. This is followed by Sanne Brands’s work on the science fiction thriller *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005), which investigates especially Scarlett Johansson’s character through Laura Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze. Then, Alex Groapa makes a compelling argument about parody in her video essay on *Austenland* (Jerusha Hess, 2013). Fittingly, Sophia Trayser’s work comes next and asks why Jane Austen’s work is so frequently adapted into film – and answers the question compellingly with scenes from *Pride & Prejudice* (Joe Wright, 2005). The video essay collection ends with a video essay on the use of music as dialogue in the animation film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (Kelly Asbury and Lorna Cook, 2002) by Setareh Ghasemireza.

Each of the projects is accompanied by a creator's statement which offers some further context to the creation process and/or the essay's argument. However, the video essays mostly speak for themselves – in writing, spoken words, music, and moving images.

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Alissa Lienhard (she/her) is a former student assistant and current master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a bachelor's degree in the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as first subject and Biology as second subject. Her bachelor thesis, "Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down?: Language(s) of Repression and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*" develops an argument about the power of language in the context of feminist speculative literature. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on film, television, comics, science fiction, feminism, neurodiversity, and gender/queer studies. Alissa Lienhard is a founding member of *In Progress's* editorial board.

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