
Click Here To Print This Video Essay: Observations on Open Access and Non- Traditional Format in Digital Cinema and Media Studies Publishing

By Andrew Myers

[MEDIASCAPE](#), a publication of UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television, was established in 2006 as the first Gold Open Access peer-reviewed journal of film and media studies. Over the past year I have had the opportunity to serve as *MEDIASCAPE*'s co-editor-in-chief, along with my colleague Andrew Young. Helping to manage this journal's operation and evolution has given me a unique vantage point on the current state of digital scholarship in our field. In this short essay I hope to share my observations on the benefits and potential hazards of the current trend of Open Access publishing, the formal advantages of media-rich digital essays, and what I see as the frontier of future possibilities for digital scholarship. My own current affiliation with the journal has inevitably weighted my convictions about the value of *MEDIASCAPE*, but I will not be merely shilling here. Digital journals like *MEDIASCAPE* pioneer future possibilities in film and media studies scholarship, but they also face unique economic, legal, and prestige-related challenges in the changing academic landscape.

MEDIASCAPE is proud not only to make high-quality, cutting-edge film and media scholarship widely available free of charge, but also to embrace a non-traditional multimedia format with rich incorporation of video essays, images, moving image clips, and other embedded media. We strive to create a journal that is impossible to print because it takes full advantage of the formal possibilities of digital humanities scholarship.

In recent years, *MEDIASCAPE*'s particular emphasis on publishing video essays has come, in part, from a flurry of interest by UCLA faculty and graduate students. A number of these essays have come from UCLA Professor Janet Bergstrom's [graduate course](#) on visual essay production in which students learn how to adapt their previously-written research papers into audiovisual form. UCLA is also home to a recently-founded student group "*Cine-Essais*", which is entirely devoted to the theory and practice of video essays. Film and media studies is, of course, a discipline particularly well suited to the video essay form, which is simply a scholarly argument constructed in linear audiovisual form through a combination of still images, text, moving image clips, diagrams, audio

clips, and voice-over narration.

MEDIASCAPE also encourages its authors to incorporate media into more traditional text-based writing. Embedded video clips enable highly detailed visual analysis, as in Bryan Wuest's [recent essay on the mise-en-scene of the 1955 film *The Night of the Hunter*](#). Wuest analyzes the 83 shots of the film's central 13-minute "river sequence," incorporating throughout the text a clip of the entire sequence, numerous screen-grab images of key shots, audio clips that focus on soundtrack motifs, and re-edited clips which juxtapose shots from early and late in the sequence in order to highlight their symmetry. Were this a publication in a traditional text-based journal, Wuest would need to assume his audience was already familiar with the film and clutter his essay with wordy descriptions of the shots' basic characteristics. With the benefit of his visual aids, however, Wuest exploits juxtaposition of word and image, framing his descriptive analysis in counterpoint with the actual images. As our field has widely embraced a multimedia presentation style in both the classroom and formal conference presentations, the advantage of a similar integration of multimedia into the customs of our scholarly publications seem obvious.

Personally, I am someone who often finds it difficult to read long written essays (to say nothing of entire books) on a computer or mobile device. It's not that I can't physically look at a screen for a long time, but rather that having interactive control gives me a multitask mentality. I know I'm far from the only one with the constant urge to check my email, churn through RSS feeds, and visit favorite websites, no matter how much an article interested me. In my academic research I prefer reading unplugged, so I find myself printing a lot of articles and purchasing print copies of books rather than their less-expensive electronic versions. This would seem to contradict my formerly stated ambition for *MEDIASCAPE*, that it be a journal impossible to print. Can we really expect people to read entire 15 - 40 page research papers on a web site? Shouldn't long-form sustained arguments be presented in a medium optimal for maintaining undivided attention? In my eyes, this is certainly an advantage of the print medium—which I don't think will go away anytime soon—but *MEDIASCAPE*'s authors have exemplified techniques for sustaining attention in the increasingly distraction-based digital environment. Our authors (with the valuable input of peer reviewers) keep long-form scholarship engaging in large part through excellent writing and high-quality research. In addition, when authors incorporate images and other media, it does more than simply add visual interest: it adds breathing room between chunks of text and provides a sort of relevant distraction, something interesting and refreshing that readers can briefly engage and then return immediately to the text. This is not so different from a film instructor's strategic use of a film clip in a class not only to illustrate a point, but also to alleviate restless, attention-drained

students.

Several other online media studies publications, including [In Media Res](#), [FlowTV](#), and [Antenna](#) take distinct but equally viable approaches to online publishing. Unlike *MEDIASCAPE*, which has published only one to two issues per year centered on peer-reviewed feature essays, these three all update with new, short-form content on an ongoing basis. Constant updates, succinct writing, less formal tone, and topic diversity have allowed these publications to grow into active communities of diverse scholars who continually generate engaging discussion. The format of these publications has inspired our soon-to-launch short-form *MEDIASCAPE Blog*, which we hope will foster year-round dialogue and nurture a robust scholarly community grounded in our journal's unique identity.

MEDIASCAPE has also successfully experimented with adapting roundtables to the new media context. We begin by bringing together leading scholars into a live roundtable discussion, then transcribe the recording, and finally go back and add illustrative links, images, and embedded video. Adapting the interview into a media rich form does deviate from the original words of the respondents, who did not, of course, speak in hyperlinks. This can sometimes admittedly disrupt the flow of the conversation — for instance, you might watch a 53-minute talk by Tom Bissel between a question by David O'Grady and the response by Eddo Stern in our recent [roundtable on video games](#). But it also turns a linear conversation into something richly non-linear and interactive. Sure, you could google the "McDonalds Video Game" or follow a footnote if you read the interview in print form, but being able to click a link and instantly play the game adds a lot. It's a simple but significant addition that transforms the traditional interview transcript into a more engaging and surprising experience.

At the same time, despite the clear formal benefits of rich multimedia publishing, online journals also face unique issues. First, many authors are concerned that online publishing carries less prestige and credibility than established print journals in the eyes of hiring and tenure committees. While an eventual leveling between online and print journals seems realistic, authors concerns are based in genuine realities of institutional biases that will only change gradually. As such, groups interested in founding new journals (such as the upcoming *Media Industries Journal*) are exploring the possibilities of hybrid print/online journals which would offer a rich multimedia version (with embedded video and images) and a traditional print version. The primary issue with this hybrid format, in my perception, is that multimedia ceases to be an integral part of making an argument, and rather simply becomes an appendage to the argument. This hybrid format would certainly exclude

video essays and intense visual analysis such as in Bryan Wuest's previously mentioned essay. Online journals are unable to take full advantage of the medium-specific possibilities of digital publishing without cutting the cord to the print format. Yet, as new journals like *Media Industries Journal* have recognized, in today's academic landscape a print version can add real value to the professional development of a journal's published authors.

In addition to these issues of status and media specificity, multimedia publications like *MEDIASCAPE* also must grapple with considerations of copyright regulations. *MEDIASCAPE* is able to make transformative use of copyrighted content under the US legal doctrine of Fair Use, yet definitions of which uses fall under Fair Use are far from concrete. Fair Use is primarily a defensive argument, meaning that if film studios so chose, they could sue us for copyright infringement. If something like that happened, we would almost certainly be able to defend ourselves, but only at significant cost to UCLA. We recommend that other online publications consult the Center for Social Media's widely accepted guidelines, especially [Best Practices in Fair Use for Online Video](#). In addition, the legality for US scholars to rip film clips from DVDs for use in their academic activities is governed by a set of periodically-reviewed guidelines which are overhauled every few years by the U.S. Copyright Office. In 2006, university film and media studies professors gained an exemption to be able to legally circumvent copy-protection mechanisms on DVDs, and in 2010 this exemption was expanded to all university professors as well as film and media students. These rules are currently undergoing another round of hearings, and it is unclear whether academics' legal rights to rip moving image material will expand or contract. Without the rights we are currently allowed, *MEDIASCAPE* as it is could not exist.

Another challenge facing online Open Access journals in our field is their economic model. The business model of traditional publications, such as *Cinema Journal*, understandably restricts their content to those who pay for access, whether directly through individual subscription, or indirectly through institutional licensing arrangement. Open Access publications and databases, on the other hand, freely distribute their content online at no charge, and usually offer more liberal copyright arrangements with authors. It's important to understand that Open Access publications and projects are not free. Rather, Open Access projects still incur considerable costs, both in expenditures and in labor to operate such an endeavor. Though digital journals do make marginal improvements in the efficiency of the review and publishing process, those savings are easily offset by technological expenditures. Open Access scholarship operates on an alternate economic model that shifts costs away from libraries and individual users and onto institutional subsidies, grant funding, volunteer

labor, and/or submitting authors.

For publications like *MEDIASCAPE*, Open Access certainly has a number of hidden considerations and drawbacks. We operate on an extremely limited budget, which means that the majority of our editorial staff are unpaid volunteer graduate students. In return for their efforts, they gain experience, scholarly connections, and CV credit—but no paycheck. While unpaid labor is also commonplace for traditional “paid” journals (especially on the part of peer reviewers), our inability to fairly compensate for most of the skilled labor we demand inevitably adds a significant degree of institutional friction. Despite working with generous and skilled staff editors and peer reviewers, keeping everyone on track for deadlines has always been a challenge. Of course, the ideal solution—more money—is always easier said than done. And unlike traditional journals, which have a clear path to increased income through gains in subscribers, it’s unclear how Open Access publications might be able to increase their budgets. One model that has become more popular recently in Open Access publications (especially in the sciences) is to impose fees on essay submitters. In grant-rich fields, the viability of this approach is tied to the ability of researchers to budget journal submission fees into their grant proposals. In film and media studies, it seems to me like a rather difficult proposition, especially for graduate students. Any movement on the part of journals toward submitter fees would need to be matched by universities and departments providing funds to faculty and students to help cover the costs of submitting to journals. For the foreseeable future, Open Access will struggle to find a standard economic model. This means that funding for such journals will, like *MEDIASCAPE*, probably be cobbled together piecemeal from a variety of institutional sponsors.

We should be optimistic about the possibilities for digital publishing to give rising generations of film and media scholars new ways to connect and interact with one another, broader access to research, new formats for scholarship, and better ways to disseminate their work. As this new frontier of possibilities opens, the unique legal, economic, and status-related challenges of digital publishing will take time to resolve. By hybridizing the traditional peer-reviewed journal format with an Open Access model and experimental forays into multimedia integration, *MEDIASCAPE* offers just one of many possible examples of how to navigate the tensions of online publishing during the increasing digitization of our field in the coming years.

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