
Teaching the Scholarly Video

By Christian Keathley

For the past several years, I have taught a course at [Middlebury College](#) on producing video essays – something Catherine Grant and I, at the 2012 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, identified as the discipline’s emergent scholarly form. The essential question faced in the production of the scholarly video is not technological, but conceptual. This question, which I have elaborated elsewhere, is how to develop a rhetoric that ‘matches’ a mode of presentation consisting of moving images and sounds – a mode that is therefore as much poetic as it is explanatory.

As I have written, most video essays ‘are still very much language based. Or more correctly, we could say that [they] reside comfortably within the explanatory mode, and it is language in that mode (spoken and written) that guides it. Images and sounds – even when carefully and creatively manipulated in support of an argument – are subordinated to explanatory language’ (Keathley, 2011: 180-181). By contrast, there are video essays that ‘resist a commitment to the explanatory mode, allowing it to surface only intermittently, and they employ language sparingly, and even then as only one, unprivileged component’ (181). Often in such more poetical works, ‘we are asked first to experience the arrangement of images and sounds before we understand them’ (182). In this way, these videos effectively borrow the power of those very qualities that comprise their objects of study. Instead of explaining some critical insight about a film, these videos, at their most effective and inventive, perform it.

Because the term ‘essay’ is synonymous with the explanatory, and thus carries with it certain assumptions and expectations, I have decided that it is perhaps best to abandon the use of ‘essay’ in the description of these works. Indeed, part of the task of this course, in imagining what forms the scholarly video can take, is to break free of a simple analogy (it’s like an essay, only it uses images and sounds) and, through experimentation, help the scholarly video find or invent its own forms.

I have taken up teaching this class for several reasons. First, designing a syllabus – selecting readings and devising assignments – has forced me to articulate very concretely certain ideas I have about the scholarly video, as well as given me a formal context that challenges me to develop new ideas. The need to lay a theoretical foundation for why and how film scholars should undertake this media project is a challenge, but an essential one. As scholars, we have to offer such justification for our

research, so that we can demonstrate to our colleagues why such work is worthy. But, of course, with vanguard work such as this, the need for such a scholarly rationale is more acute. While we are currently seeing a groundswell of support for developments in the 'digital humanities', the assumption is that this scholarship will reside comfortably within the sanctioned explanatory mode. Work that deviates from this mode requires especial justification.

Second, I teach this course because I can. I have support from my department in developing new courses; moreover, several of us in Middlebury's Film and Media Culture Department (especially my colleagues Jason Mittell and Louisa Stein) are interested in exploring the ways in which scholarship is being transformed in the digital age. This means not just online journals, but scholarship composed and presented in a multi-media form. We all look for ways to incorporate media production assignments of various kinds into our classes. Finally, we have exceptional media production facilities at Middlebury, along with a full time staff member to support courses involving any kind of media production. Importantly, we all firmly believe that consideration of this development in the humanities is not something restricted to professional academics. Students are well poised to contribute to this project in valuable ways. Since so many students today have basic video and computer skills, they are not intimidated by the technology and can focus on the conceptual challenges. Further, students are familiar with a variety of multi-media works that might be described as non-scholarly or quasi-scholarly - mash-ups, remixes, etc. - and many of the formal strategies used in these works are easily adaptable to forms where a 'knowledge effect' is more urgent.

Let me explain how the course is organized. We begin with a set of readings to offer conceptual grounding. First, we read selections from Walter Ong's *Orality & Literacy*, which provides a solid general foundation for the specific task we will undertake. Ong's argument is that the single most important technological development in human history has been the development of alphabetic writing. This shift from oral to alphabetic culture resulted in nothing less than a transformation in the definition of what we call 'thinking', and importantly, a development of new forms in which such thinking would be cast. Ong maintains that we are currently living through the second such monumental shift, from the alphabetic to the electronic (or digital) culture. This reading places the course's agenda squarely within the broad concerns of 'grammatology' - that is, the history and theory of Writing, or (to put it another way) the impact of technology on the production and representation of (what we call) 'knowledge'.

Next, we turn to something more recent and more disciplinarily specific:

Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second*, which forcefully articulates the positive effects DVD technology has had on film study. With features like freeze-frame, scan, slow motion, as well as random access of scenes and infinite replayability, DVDs 'have opened up new ways of seeing old movies' (8). Mulvey explains that, in traditional film analysis, 'the flow of a scene is halted and extracted from the wider flow of narrative development; the scene is broken down into shots and selected frames and further subjected to delay, to repetition and return. In the course of this process, hitherto unexpected meanings can be found hidden in the sequences, as it were, deferred to a point of time in the future when the critic's desire may unearth them'. But the spread of digital technologies has made this kind of fragmentation of film much easier to put into practice - and 'In this context, textual analysis ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema' (144).

The emotional motivation for analysis that Mulvey describes here is essential, especially for students, who are not typically asked to engage so intimately with their objects of study, but rather to keep them at a 'critical distance'. Further, while she does not dwell on it, Mulvey acknowledges the potential for representing our 'analysis' in a way that is appropriate both to the fetishistic desire that has motivated it, and to the digital technology that enabled it and into which it will be cast. 'There is a temptation' she writes, 'to detach a privileged sequence from its narrative armature. This is a gesture that dismisses narrative and context and brings the cinephile's love of Hollywood movies into touch with the counter-cinema of the avant-garde' (145). Indeed, the scholarly videos we seek to produce in these classes sometimes resemble the art-about-cinema from conceptual artists like Douglas Gordon, Mark Lewis, and Cindy Bernard.

Next, at a time when digital technologies seem linked exclusively with special effects and illusion, I want to remind students of film's other power: its intimate relationship with reality, its ability to reveal the real world and to stand as a record of it. Mulvey also makes this point quite clearly: DVD technology re-facilitates our access to this essential filmic property. So we read some essential André Bazin - the "Ontology" essay, of course, and as commentary, Dudley Andrew's recent *What Cinema Is!*, particularly for its emphasis on the role of negative and imaginary values in Bazin's theory of cinema. In a wonderful passage contrasting Bazin's and Sartre's respective interests in film, Andrew explains, 'Neither Bazin nor Sartre cares about the photograph as object; the analogon is what interests them both, but the analogon points in two different directions and these men diverge in how they discuss it. Sartre lifts it instantly toward the imagination, where it triggers associations in a manner distinct from other types of image-consciousness. Bazin goes in the other

direction, toward the photo's source, characterizing how the photo's analogon leads us back to the world from which it was ripped. For Sartre, the photograph quickly fades into absence to the extent that it succeeds in getting us to attend to the analogon, which in turn is consumed by the freewheeling imagination where memory, emotion, and other images come into play. Bazin, less interested in the freedom of the imagination, focuses on the power of the photograph to amplify our perception, 'teaching us' what our eyes alone would not have noticed' (13).

To give way to the imaginary or to focus on the concrete? Extending either approach too far (far enough?) leads inevitably to the other - appropriate when considering the cinema, which gives us precisely this paradox: fictions made out of reality. This entanglement is the focus of much of our next reading, Robert B Ray's *The ABCs of Classic Hollywood*. Ray's book consists of dozens of alphabetized short entries on four films: *Grand Hotel*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Meet Me in St Louis*. Each entry isolates some detail (analogon) of the film in question (a prop, a star, a camera movement) - 'the isolated objects and moments potentially obscured by a film's momentum' (xix) - and considers how it contributes to the film's construction of its meanings and effects. At first, the book seems to follow the Bazinian approach, following the concrete detail back to the world; but at other times it follows imaginative associations of memory and emotion. Indeed, many of these entries emphasize the way that the close analysis afforded by DVD technology pulls into relief the cinema's extraordinary mixture of fiction and reality.

For example, Ray often considers the reality that serves as a backdrop for the film's fiction - *The Maltese Falcon* is set in San Francisco, a real American city with real street names, a real history - and imagines more intersections between the real world and the world of the film's fiction than we are given. An entry on *Meet Me in St Louis* ('Fair'), for example, considers in detail some of the sordid goings-on around the fringes of the historical 1904 World's Fair. Did the film's Smith family know about this dark underbelly of the fair's celebration of progress? Another entry ('Violinist') wonders whether T. S. Eliot is on board the streetcar during the famous 'Trolley Song' number. After all, Eliot was from St Louis, and was exactly the same age as Esther, the character played by Judy Garland. *The ABCs* is inconceivable without the benefits of DVD technology, for it depends on its special digital features to undertake detailed investigations. Ray does an even more convincing job than Mulvey of actually demonstrating how DVD technology has changed film study, changing also the rhetorical form of in which scholarship is offered. My course's first readings lay out the theoretical foundation for the task at hand, while Ray's book most effectively shows the potential for

an alternative rhetorical approach.

In addition to these readings, we consider other alternatives in the form of recent video essay work – by Tag Gallagher on several Criterion DVDs, plus examples by Catherine Grant, Eric Faden, Matt Zoller Seitz, Kevin Lee, Jim Emerson, and others. The goal we set is to produce work that engages with the poetic potential of the technology, but that also has an effect of knowledge. So then we turn to making...

But while the students' conceptual grounding is now solid, they still need a focused and concrete set of instructions for making their own work. I take two steps here. First, I select a single film for the entire class to work on – one time it was *The Bad and the Beautiful*, another time it was *In a Lonely Place* (both films about Hollywood filmmaking). Thus, the class might be described as quasi-collaborative. Everyone working on a single film allows a measure of collaboration, while still giving individual students control over their own projects. We follow a workshop model: students present ideas, then show work in progress, and because everyone else in the class knows the film well, they can offer more useful feedback than if they weren't so familiar with the film a student was working on. For some students, seeing an example of a successful project underway is the key stimulant to getting them to understand the assignment and get started on their own imaginative work.

Second, because we are all working on one film, and because we want to collect the video essays as a product of the class collaboration, we turn to a conventional form: the 'Bonus DVD'. The collected scholarly videos we produce stand as our own alternative Bonus DVD. Further, having the standard Bonus DVD as a model – with its various generic forms – is also helpful, as students often find it easiest to take an existing genre formula and rework it. Here are two examples, both of which effectively rework a common Bonus DVD feature.

Here is Hannah Epstein's profile of director Nicholas Ray, constructed entirely out of clips from his films, in which the characters seem to be talking about their director [<http://vimeo.com/41302561>]. This piece was stimulated the student's interest in what she had read about Ray, and following the conventional critical approach of illuminating the ways in which the work reflects the artist, she sought some alternative form of showing what the director's films said about him.

Another common bonus feature is the motion picture trailer. The trailer that Nora Fiore created requires some contextualization. *In a Lonely Place* is the story of Dix Steele (Humphrey Bogart), a Hollywood screenwriter with a reputation for being 'difficult'. As the film begins, he meets his agent at some Hollywood watering hole, and the agent reports

that he has secured a job for Dix: adapting a novel, the sudser *Althea Bruce*. Dix leaves the book with the bar's hat-check girl, Mildred Atkinson, who proceeds to become absorbed in it. When he departs, Dix asks her to come to his apartment and tell him the story of the book (in order to spare him the ordeal of having to actually read it). In a striking scene, the young woman recounts the story to him with great dramatic emphasis. Fiore decided to construct a trailer for this unmade film, *Althea Bruce*. She scoured dozens of 1940s movie trailers on Youtube, settling ultimately on Joan Crawford as the star to play the title character, and she let Mildred's words guide the preview [<http://vimeo.com/41302706>].

Working on *The Bad and the Beautiful*, Simran Bhalla re-read one of the film's most famous scenes: actress Gloria Lorrison's (Lana Turner) hysterical breakdown, driving her car in a rainstorm at night, after she has discovered that producer Jonathan Shields (Kirk Douglas) has betrayed her with another woman. Bhalla lays over the scene an audio recording of New York poet Frank O'Hara reading his 'Poem' (commonly known as 'Lana Turner Has Collapsed') in order to highlight, as she has put it, 'our simultaneous love and derision for Hollywood and celebrity'. [<http://vimeo.com/41302248>]

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