The line between academic and non-scholarly videographic film criticism

by Ian Garwood

The production of *The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism* (2016) coincided with the release of two books focused on videographic film studies: *The Videographic Essay – Criticism in Sound and Image*, edited by Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell;[1] and *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video*, by Thomas van den Berg and Miklos Kiss.[2] The most recent instalments in a rich vein of writing exploring the potential of audiovisual research within screen studies,[3] these two works set out distinctive (audio)visions of the format. A shared point of deliberation is the balance the 'academic' video essay should strike in its adherence to traditional scholarly virtues and its exploration of the audiovisual form's more 'poetic' possibilities. Essentially, Keathley and Mittell encourage film studies academics to loosen up; they begin with a description of editing exercises that invite participants to play with sounds and images in ways to help them 'unlearn' their usual habits of academic research and presentation. Van den Berg and Kiss, by contrast, argue polemically for a considerable tightening of practice in video essay work, if it is to be considered academically credible.

Van den Berg and Kiss advocate the 'autonomous and explanatorily argumentative research video'[4] as the ideal form audiovisual work in film studies should take. This is the term I have used to describe my voiceover essay video in the end credits. However, the video is also marked by playful and performative elements that seem more aligned with the approach Keathley and Mittell promote. This explains why I have placed a question mark after my end-credit statement, and I want to extend the questioning of what I have actually produced in this written reflection: is there an essential incompatibility between the video's performative qualities and its desire to put forward a self-contained and lucid academic argument?

Van den Berg and Kiss consider the authorial position that research videos adopt as key to their academic identity. Such work should occupy a critical vantage point marked by distance, whereby the video essay offers 'a framed perspective on a case study'.[5] They argue that too often the opposite is true, with the case study (i.e. the audiovisual example[s] being discussed) dictating what is presented. I hope the framed perspective of my video essay is clear. It possesses the TREE structure referenced and advocated by van den Berg and Kiss ('**Thesis** supported by **Reasons** which rest upon **Evidence** and **Examples**').[6] It has clearly-defined sections: an introduction that establishes the topic to be investigated (00:00 – 02:13); a main body introducing three key points, with each one delineated (02:13 – 10:13); a reflective section looking back at the three points, providing more evidence and suggesting actions going forward (10:13 – 16:15); and a conclusion (16:15 – 17:41). However, the form the argument takes is clearly influenced (dictated?) by the film/video essay materials on display. For instance, the introduction would not adopt a split-screen aesthetic and the dotted line would be nowhere to be seen had I not chosen to use kogonada's *Wes Anderson // Centered* (2014) as my example of a video essay without voiceover. The porosity of the borders between my video essay's 'own' aesthetic and those examples it uses is illustrated most vividly in the cross-contamination of *Centered* and the elements I have created for the screen. When *Centered* begins, screen right, 'my' content, screen left, begins to ape the former video's play with symmetry and its use of a dotted line. My content then migrates to the space occupied by *Centered*, invading its frame (the superimposition of captions between 01:36 and 01:51). Authorial control of this segment of the screen seems to be confirmed by

the replacement of *Centered* with my onscreen appearance. However, kogonada is not to be dismissed that easily, with 'his' dotted line returning to hit me on the head (02:09).

Clearly, in the context of setting up a thesis to be explored in a scholarly fashion, there is something excessively performative and 'unnecessary' about this introduction. However, once established as a performing element the dotted line does assist in exploring the issues that the video essay is raising. It is subsequently seen fulfilling scholarly functions, helping to separate two quotations (03:41), dividing the screen into distinct argumentative sections (10:18 – 16:05), and demarcating the four distinctive zones that share the same screen for the conclusion (16:21 – 16:58). As such it expresses, visually, the dilemma that is being grappled with argumentatively, regarding the place voiceover should have in academic audiovisual film and television criticism: the desire to advocate the 'traditional' scholarly values of clarity and explanatory force the voiceover can lend to video essays (in the same way the dotted line lends clarity to the organisation of the frame); and the concurrent interest in exploring the expressive potential of the audiovisual format (as indicated by the way a functional element [a dotted line] is brought to life and its activities dramatised).

In my reflection on this moment I am attempting to align the playful and malleable qualities of my video essay with the values advocated by van den Berg and Kiss: the requirement for a defined and logical argumentative structure, as well as the desire to establish a critical distance from the object of study. Rather than representing these values as conflicting ones I have focused on an aspect of my work that attempts a reconciliation. While the recent efforts to construct taxonomies for videographic film criticism have been immensely useful[7] it may be overly limiting to regard as inviolable the boundaries between the invented categories or different approaches (e.g. poetic/argumentative, academic/non-scholarly). Audiovisual film studies has come into being as the result of a number of hybrid influences, and hybridity can still be a valuable concept. In this light the borders between different practices are best perceived as porous ones, allowing for productive interchange and cross-influence – in other words, borders that are composed of lines that are not solid, but dotted…

Author

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[1] Keathley & Mittell 2016.

[2] Van den Berg & Kiss 2016.

[3] For example, special issues or dossiers in *Frames Cinema Journal* (2012), *Cinema Journal* (2013), *The Cine-Files* (2014), *ANIKI: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image* (2014), and the variety of work curated on *The Audiovisual Essay* website.

[4] Van den Berg & Kiss 2016.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., quoting from Bordwell 2001.

[7] In their monograph, van den Berg and Miklos Kiss identify six types of essay video, from the annotated excerpt to the thesis video. The Filmscalpel website, set up in 2015 to support a university video essay course, proposes fourteen categories, while the title of a 2016 article by Conor Bateman suggests there are 'eleven ways of making a video essay'.