TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Encoding a Visual Argument: 9 Film Frames

Context of the Assignment

In 'Videographic Scholarship and/as Digital Humanities', my contribution to issue 15 of *The Cine-Files*, devoted to The Scholarly Video Essay, I advocated adopting a multi-stage process of peer review for video essays that would align established post-production workflows with review strategies developed for evaluating and revising digital humanities projects. This argument was informed by my recent experience teaching a graduate course in Videographic Scholarship in the UCLA School of Theater, Film & Television, and in particular by the first assignment in the class titled 'Encoding a Visual Argument: 9 Film Frames', in which students present a visual prototype of their intended argument and receive feedback prior to beginning the writing or editing stages of their videos.

The Videographic Scholarship course was originally conceived as a graduate seminar limited to students in the MA or PhD programs in Cinema and Media Studies (CMS). Students from the MFA filmmaking program were not allowed to enroll because – as my initial logic had it – I didn't want my CMS students to feel intimidated if they still needed to acquire basic technical skills. I was also suspicious of MFA students who might be simply trying to fulfill their 'CMS requirement' by avoiding the work of critical writing required by virtually every other CMS graduate seminar. However, when the COVID pandemic drove classes online in Spring 2020, I expanded my Videographic Scholarship class to embrace both MFA and MA/PhD students for the first time. My initial trepidation turned out to be unfounded. The fundamentally hybrid nature of the video essay form allowed students with different skills and critical sensibilities to learn from each other in ways I hadn't observed before.

The assignment, 'Encoding a Visual Argument: 9 Film Frames', has two parts. First, students are asked to read Stuart Hall's influential 1973 essay, 'Encoding/Decoding', which marked an intervention in communication theory of the 1970s, arguing for a more nuanced and culturally embedded understanding of the way messages are sent and received in popular culture. In the essay, Hall presents three possible modes of 'decoded' response to ideological meanings that are 'encoded' into cultural texts such as television programs. These three modes – dominant, negotiated, oppositional – depend on the extent to which a viewer shares the cultural values, identity or experiences of the creator. In part, this exercise is designed to underscore the challenges of conveying an intended message through visual means, but also to encourage sensitivity to diverse identities and perspectives of viewers. I find that Hall's essay is especially useful for students who have been 'correctly' trained in the critical vernacular of our field. Codified modes of expression, academically appropriate vocabulary, and recognizable theoretical models are designed, in part, to ensure the legibility and consistency of a written argument. By turning Hall's essay on the scholarly apparatus itself and reminding students of the potential for counter-readings – for example, queering – this essay helps students understand that their own work, especially when realised in the less rigidly codified form of videographic scholarship, may be met with resistant or negotiated readings among viewers.

To illustrate this principle, I use a sample 9-frame image from the 2013 feature film *The Lone Ranger* directed by Gore Verbinski. The image (Fig. 1) is deliberately ambiguous, presenting 9 frames from the film that all involve Native American iconography. Most images feature the film's co-lead actor, Johnny Depp, whose casting was criticised as

Fig. 1: *A sample image grid from The Lone Ranger (Gore Verbinski, 2013) is used to illustrate the possibility of multiple, decoded meanings.*

an example of 'red-face', in which a white actor performs as a Native American. The discourse around this case is complex and varied and I find that students bring a wide range of prior knowledge – as well as the kind of multiple subject positions and experiences emphasised by Hall – to both this film in particular and issues of cultural appropriation in general. As a result, students' 'decodings' are often multiple and contradictory, with some perceiving a pointed critique of the genocide of Native Americans rarely seen in Hollywood and others finding a reprehensible perpetuation of stereotypes related to indigenous cultures.

For the second stage, students are asked to explore the website 9 Film Frames on their own and given one week to select a film/TV show on which to base their own collage. Students are asked to consider this not as a 'project' but as a kind of rapid prototype designed to identify strengths or weaknesses of an initial concept with minimal investment of time and technical effort. Completed image grids are presented the following week (without words) and the class collectively attempts to decode the intended meaning. In the course of this process, students may be made aware of the strengths or weaknesses of their intended argument, as well as any problematic issues or alternative readings. Students are encouraged to build on this exercise and the feedback they receive when conceiving their final video essay, but they are not required to stay with the same topic. Indeed, it is not infrequent, following this exercise, for students either to abandon their original topic altogether or significantly alter their project concept. In this case, students have the option of presenting an additional 'prototype' image grid or moving directly to work on their final project.

With just 10 weeks for the class, it is imperative to get students started quickly, and in practical terms, thinking about their final projects. Although expectations vary depending on students' skill levels and topics, the basic deliverable of the class is a completed video essay (final picture edit with basic sound mix), usually 5–10 minutes in length, that presents an argument or analysis that would be recognizable in a graduate seminar in Cinema & Media Studies (CMS). Because the course is offered in CMS and opportunities to pursue more poetic or experimental forms of media making exist in the Production MFA program, students in this class are encouraged to pursue more conventionally 'scholarly' goals – particularly those that take advantage of the unique affordances of the videographic form. No specific formal strategies are prescribed (voice-over, text, etc.) but a full range of historical and contemporary examples of videographic scholarship are presented in the screening portion of the class, accompanied by discussions that focus on what type of critical objective each formal strategy most effectively supports.

The Assignment

1. Read Stuart Hall's essay, 'Encoding/Decoding' (1973) and explore a variety of image grids found on the fan site *9 Film Frames:* https://9filmframes.tumblr.com.
2. Select a film or films (TV show or shows) and create an image grid modeled on *9 Film Frames* that expresses an argument or interpretation that will serve as a conceptual prototype for your final video essay. Think about ways to distill and clarify your intended argument without using words. What is your message? Who are you trying to reach? Assignments will be presented in class next week and we will attempt to decode your intended meaning.

Fig. 2: *Sarah Nixon's 9 Film Frames assignment based on Arnold's Fish Tank (2009) highlights the use of third person perspective.*

Reflection

Here are what I view as the advantages and disadvantages of this exercise:

Advantages

- Compels students to distill their argument to a readily communicable message.
- Erodes the dependence on text that some students bring to the class.
- Establishes a foundation for close visual analysis.
- Underscores the importance of cultural context and multiple viewpoints.
- Sharpens students' attention to using media as evidence (rather than illustration) in support of a specific argument.

Disadvantages

- May disproportionately support arguments that highlight the formal properties of still frames (e.g., cinematography or production design).
- May inhibit students from pursuing abstract or theoretical topics that are not clearly visible in a film's mise-en-scène.
- May steer students away from topics that require a temporal dimension, such as sound, editing, performance, etc.
- Starting with a fan website may encourage cinephilic celebrations of styles, genres or auteurs over critical analysis.

An example from my Videographic Scholarship class that shows how this exercise led to an effective video essay is Sarah Nixon's treatment of *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009). In the 9 Film Frames exercise shown here (Fig. 2), Nixon selects numerous scenes in which the film's protagonist is photographed from behind with an OTS (over-the-shoulder) framing that emphasises the distance of the character from the action of the scene. Because of the uniformity of the frames selected, the class had no trouble decoding the intended meaning. The grid was recognisable as being about how cinematography was used to depict a character and her (isolated, detached) relation to the world. Comparisons were made to the cinematography of *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) and the

Fig. 3: *Moving beyond the visual motif of over-the-shoulder shots, Sarah Nixon's video essay expanded to highlight instances of visual iconography for loneliness and isolation.*

visual perspective of third-person video games, both of which were thought to encourage viewers to identify directly with the subjective experience of the character; however, it was also noted that the video game aesthetic, which was used to deliberate effect by Van Sant to create a not-so-subtle association between video games and violence, was not an intended aspect of this film.

In her final video essay [link: 7:27], Nixon sets up the basic context of the film within Arnold's body of work, stating, 'In this video essay we will dive into how Arnold uses cinematography techniques to communicate isolation and loneliness.' As the essay unfolds, Nixon analyzes multiple examples of the OTS shot and then shifts to discussion of a variety of symbolic, performative and narrative images (Fig. 3) that differently underscore themes of loneliness and isolation. Nixon also makes effective use of still frames, repetition and fast motion to provide context and opportunities for close analysis. In the end, this assignment appears to have served its purpose, helping the student refine the legibility of her intended argument and also to recognise the benefit of expanding beyond her initial concept. While the assignment may have helped to avoid an unintended association (a kind of negotiated reading) with 3rd person POV video games, it also allowed – and may have encouraged – the analysis to remain within the domain of formalism, with the ultimate argument being essentially an appreciation of the effective use of the craft of cinematography in Arnold's film.

For future iterations of the class, this example suggests a couple of possible modifications to the 9 Film Frames assignment. Rather than privileging 'successful' communication (a dominant reading), perhaps students should be asked to imagine their own instances of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings within their chosen text. Alternatively, students could be challenged to create an image grid that explores potential complexities or contradictions arising from the tension between what is visible in the frame and what cannot be shown. Another variation might allow students to introduce an element of sound or text intended to reinforce (or complicate?) the intended meaning of their image grid. Ultimately, the value of this assignment may derive less from the specifics of the prompt and more from the use of rapid, conceptual prototyping to elicit early and multiple cycles of feedback and revision.

STEVE F. ANDERSON

Steve Anderson is Professor of Film, Television & Digital Media and Design Media Arts at UCLA. He is the author of *Technologies of Vision: The War Between Data and Images* (MIT 2017) and *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past* (Dartmouth 2011), and co-editor of the anthology *Reclaiming Popular Documentary* (Indiana 2021). He is also a scholarly video essayist, an award-winning media artist, and the creator and administrator of the public media archive Critical Commons. He holds a PhD in Film, Literature & Culture from USC and an MFA in Film & Video from CalArts.

Works cited

Hall, Stuart. (1999) 'Encoding/Decoding' in During, Simon (ed) *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 97–111.