

TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Introduction

The following dossier of audiovisual essay assignments was originally intended for *The Cine-Files*, issue 16, building on issue 15's discussions of the scholarly video essay. But as it turns out, issue 15 is the final issue of *The Cine-Files*. Though *The Cine-Files* as a standalone journal is retiring, I'm delighted to see it enjoy an 'afterlife' through a merger of sorts with *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*. I am honoured to have joined the editorial board of *Movie* and excited to imagine how the heart of *The Cine-Files* will continue to beat there. We are still imagining the possibilities, but one likely outcome will see a *Cine-Files* influence in an increased presence of *Movie's* audiovisual essay materials.

In that spirit, I am pleased to introduce the following five reflections on teaching the audiovisual essay. Each contributor was asked to contextualise and share an audiovisual essay assignment, provide student example(s), and reflect on the value of the assignment. While the intention of the dossier was more practical than contemplative, I can nonetheless see how the broad questions that oriented [The Cine-Files issue 15](#) – focusing on the 'scholarly video essay', edited by Allison de Fren and myself – continue to reverberate.

The five assignments detailed in this dossier share an appreciation for experimentation as a preliminary step to

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constructing the audiovisual essay. Three of the contributors credit the 'Middlebury method' for its emphasis on experimentation and discovery. No doubt, the ludic, open-ended experiments modelled at the Middlebury Workshop, Scholarship in Sound and Image, have shaped the discourse and practice of the academic audiovisual essay in important ways, giving scholars permission to think and work as artists before they think and work as theoreticians.

Whether or not they reference the influence of Middlebury, it's clear from all the assignments that a two-stage process – first playing with the materials and second editing and shaping those results into an argument – is a standard practice for audiovisual work in the film studies classroom. In contrast to the other four assignments which require a video essay outcome, Lého Galibert-Lainé's assignment focuses solely on the preliminary experimentation. Developed during the pandemic, Galibert-Lainé's assignment conveys an interesting twist for the film studies classroom, asking students to temporarily abandon their screens and 'interpret' their digital materials in the physical world, relying on physical artefacts – using things like paper, paint, even their own embodied performance – to represent their concerns. While the resulting analogue experiments were later to be

incorporated into a video essay, that final product is not the focus of the assignment.

Though they also begin with experiments, the other four assignments detailed here put greater emphasis on the final video essay product. Focusing on voiceover narration, Allison de Fren's assignment enlists Aldous Huxley's definition of the 'essayistic' to encourage the transition from experiment to video essay, asking students to consider how their final work might span the three registers Huxley identifies: the personal / autobiographical, the factual / concrete, and the abstract / universal. Both Shane Denson and John Gibbs share open-ended video essay assignments that build on previous Middlebury-inspired exercises, and their reflections suggest that key to their assignments' success is the early exposure to videographic experimentation. Similarly, Steve Anderson's assignment begins with material exercises, detailing a '9 film frames' experiment as a parametric strategy that will ultimately help students construct a visual argument to be elaborated in their final essay.

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