

TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Videographic Experimentation as Theme and Medium

Context of the Assignment

When discussing my pedagogical practice, I often say, innocuously enough, that ‘I teach video essays.’ The simplicity of the statement, however, belies a great deal of semantic and pragmatic complexity. Context matters, of course. Sometimes my statement is made casually, such as when I am discussing with colleagues who also do videographic work as part of their teaching and scholarship, while sometimes it is quite emphatic – for example, when my assertion is made in the context of a job application or tenure file, as evidence of my ‘innovative’ teaching philosophy. More subtly, the meaning of the statement ‘I teach video essays’ is complicated internally, depending on whether emphasis is placed on the verb or the predicate of the sentence: do I mean to emphasise the object of pedagogical attention, in which case the predicate ‘video essays’ carries the (implicit if not explicit) weight of emphasis? Or do I mean to emphasise the activity of teaching, in conjunction with which I employ video essays in one way or another? As an example of the former, I teach a course called ‘The Video Essay’, where video essays (and related videographic practices) are the explicit object of instruction – the thing that everyone in the classroom is focused on learning

about and producing. But I also employ video essays in other classes, where they might serve as vehicles for discussing a variety of other topics (e.g. as a means of foregrounding formal properties of visual media or for introducing a filmmaker, genre, or theorist), or where they are offered as possible assignments students can produce in lieu of more traditional written essays and research papers (as a means of demonstrating their knowledge of and critical engagement with the actual object of attention, e.g. a filmmaker, genre, or theorist). In the latter case, arguably, I am not so much teaching *video essays* as I am *teaching* (with) video essays.

In practice, this difference makes all the difference in the world. In fact, it is not just ‘a difference that makes a difference’ as Gregory Bateson famously defined *information*, but it concerns a higher-order difference – that of the *medium* within which such differences, or pieces of information, are articulated (Bateson: 1972).¹ The choice between emphasizing the object (teaching *video essays*) or the activity (*teaching* video essays) translates into a difference between thematizing the video essay as a medium or focusing on the information expressed therein. And this has practical consequences for the way I approach and evaluate video essays in various pedagogical contexts, including the types of videographic assignments that appear on my syllabi.

When I teach my class on ‘The Video Essay,’ the focus is squarely on the medium, and the assignments accordingly aim to focus attention on the *mediality* of the video essay – its particular affordances for critical and creative expression by audiovisual means. The mediality of a medium, as I understand it, concerns the relation between a material substrate (the elements or ‘stuff’ it’s made of: sounds, images, text, etc.) and the aesthetic and communicative forms that are made possible through novel combinations of those basic elements.² To attend to a medium’s mediality accordingly means to attend to a set of relations and conditions of possibility, rather than (foremost) to ‘content.’ Formal experimentation is therefore called for, and in my teaching (in this mode) this takes the form of small, modular, and parametrically constrained exercises. Here, I follow the example of my own teachers – experimental filmmaker Shambhavi Kaul, with whom I learned video editing in the context of her ‘Experimental Film and Video’

class while I was a postdoc at Duke University, and Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, whose NEH-funded ‘Scholarship in Sound & Image’ workshop I attended in its first cohort at Middlebury College. In this mode, formal constraints provide the framework for creativity, inviting students to work around more or less arbitrary restrictions (no character dialogue is to be used, for example) and requirements (re-stage the narrative from the point of view of a supporting character) and to find novel solutions – in the process focusing on the medium itself and discovering what it can do under pressure.

What these exercises teach us, to modify Spinoza’s famous interrogation of the body, is that we still do not know what a video essay can do.³ We are constantly surprised at what the medium is capable of, what unknown capacities it reveals when subjected to discipline and constraint. This leads me, finally, to the question I have been building toward since the outset: When, under what circumstances, is it justified to do away with these constraints? Having discovered that the medium can do more than I could ever myself imagine, there is a temptation to refrain from disciplining it, from locking it down or artificially constricting imagination and experimentation on a still evolving form. When is a more open-ended form of experimentation called for?

One reasonable answer is that constraint-free experimentation is best reserved for *after* one has completed a rigorous regimen of parametric exercises. But, recalling my initial distinction between ‘teaching *video essays*’ and ‘*teaching* (with) video essays,’ is it ever justified to assign students the task, simply, of making a video essay about *x*, where *x* is a topic covered in an arbitrary class, and where one cannot assume students’ prior experience with making (or even studying) video essays? Is this not to betray everything I have said about mediality and simply to revert to ‘content’? Not, I contend, if *x* is a topic that emerges out of a careful consideration of mediality, in which case the free-form ‘video essay about *x*’ becomes every bit as self-reflexive as the constraint-driven exercise, and experimentation becomes both theme and medium of the video essay.

What this means, however, is that an open-ended video essay assignment will only make sense under highly constrained conditions. In my own teaching, these conditions

are met only rarely, for example in my ‘Media and Mediums’ class (basically, an introduction to media theory) and in my advanced seminar on ‘Post-Cinema.’ In the former, I allow students to submit a video essay (or other ‘critical media project’) in lieu of a research paper on a topic of their choice, with the understanding that it must demonstrate a critical engagement with (some of) the media-theoretical approaches discussed in class (which includes a significant emphasis on phenomenological and aesthetic approaches to visual and other media ranging from spoken and written language to photography, film, the telegraph, and computation). I require students to discuss their plans early on with me, so that I can intervene and offer guidance. But I don’t give detailed instructions up front, so as not to restrict their experimentation with both form and content.

The Assignment

‘If, in lieu of one of your papers, you plan to produce a video essay or other critical media project (e.g. podcast, website, app, or other type of project that engages critically with the themes and ideas of the course), you will need to outline your idea in writing and receive prior approval from the instructor. The project itself should be accompanied by a short, written statement outlining the significance and critical potential of the project with respect to the course and the theories and approaches we have explored.’

Examples of student work

1. [Frank No. Too](#) (2019) by Robert Abraham; created for ‘Introduction to Media’
2. [Slowness and Slow Cinema](#) (2017–2018) by Spencer Slovic; created for ‘Post-Cinema’ and subsequently published in [Film Matters](#).
3. [Frames](#) (2019) by Alex H. Rafi; created for ‘Post-Cinema’

Reflection

Sometimes, as in these varied examples, the experiment of the free-form video essay assignment goes very well. Other times,

it doesn’t. When it does, I feel like I learn as much as the student about the mediality of the video essay (as genre, as form, as medium), especially when this is self-reflexively also the theme of the piece, or at least of the experimental effort and process that gave rise to it.

Open-ended experimentation has worked well in ‘Media and Mediums’ and in ‘Post-Cinema.’ In the latter, we do in fact look at and discuss video essays throughout the course, since both popular and scholarly videographic criticism emerges alongside, and is in some ways inseparable from, the changes in visual forms and the underlying technologies of digital images – the overt topic of the class. Theoretical approaches to these transformations need, I believe, to be informed by some familiarity with the practical realities – techniques and technologies – that give rise to them. Weekly videographic exercises, relatively unconstrained save for the condition that they reflect on our readings and/or screenings, thus promote an awareness of post-cinematic mediality through hands on experimentation with non-linear digital editing platforms and related technologies. A balance between subject matter and form, or theme and medium, is therefore quasi built-in, and an open-ended final assignment builds naturally upon this ongoing self-reflexive theory-practice. Interestingly, though, I have found that my class dedicated to ‘The Video Essay’ requires a great deal more structure in the assignments – perhaps because we are focused on forms more than a shared subject matter. (Recent iterations of the course focus particularly on desktop videos focused on ‘troublesome topics’ related to online life – an idea I borrow from, and have collaborated on with, Allison de Fren. These are highly scaffolded assignments with milestones and components completed over the course of up to seven weeks.)

As the above examples of student work attest, removing constraints for open-ended videographic experimentation works best when medial experimentation is itself the theme, when the thematic context becomes its own constraint and mediality becomes the object of theoretical, practical, aesthetic, and technological investigation.

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¹ In my book *Postnaturalism*, I expand on Bateson’s formula and argue that media can be understood as ‘the differences that make the differences that make a difference.’ 2014: 314.

² I am borrowing here from Niklas Luhmann, who defines mediality as ‘the operative deployment of the difference of medial substrate and form’ (1997: 195, my translation).

³ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, proposition 2. See also Deleuze 1990: 217–234.