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## Teaching Italian Film and Television and Videographic Criticism

Alan O'Leary (University of Leeds) and Dana Renga (The Ohio State University)

This article is a report on a collaborative experiment in pedagogy. Alan O'Leary was Visiting Scholar at The Ohio State University in Autumn semester 2019, during which time the two of us co-taught a graduate seminar. In our initial discussions on the content of the seminar (comprising fourteen modules of 2.5 hours each), we had planned to offer a broad but standard introduction to Italian film and television, and had imagined the syllabus might present a kind of critical 'greatest hits' in Italian film and television history and theory. This plan changed when Alan attended the two-week workshop on videographic criticism, 'Scholarship in Sound and Image', at Middlebury College in June 2018.<sup>1</sup> Fresh from this experience, Alan asked if we might consider a different type of seminar, one that took stock of videographic criticism—the audiovisual analysis of audiovisual media, often in the form of video-essays—in the context of Italian film and television studies. And so we put together an exploratory syllabus designed to interrogate the affordances of the videographic mode as critical scholarship, with Italian film and television as our content focus and case study.

As an approach to analytical work on film, videographic criticism is increasingly practiced within as well as beyond the academy and can be considered a growing part of digital humanities.<sup>2</sup> As set out below, the types of video-essays produced range from the illustrated lecture to abstract or poetic meditations, and the number of video-essays produced has multiplied exponentially over the past decade in both academic and popular forms. As we quickly realized, there is no agreement yet on the proper form that videographic criticism should take in order to qualify as scholarly practice, something that can generate excitement but also anxiety in practitioners, students and teachers ('is what I am making *legitimate* scholarship...?'). Our seminar was not intended to establish what *we* might consider the proper form, but was instead designed to immerse the students in the range of videographic modes and to investigate the character of the knowledge each claims to provide.

This article outlines the current state of videographic criticism with special reference to the Italian studies context, and goes on to report on the experience of teaching our seminar, 'Italian Film and Television, and Videographic Criticism', at OSU. To anticipate some of our conclusions: our sense is that videographic criticism is an exciting opportunity for students and scholars of the Italian context for at least three reasons. Firstly, because so much videographic activity has focused on anglophone material while what work there is on Italy has tended to focus on male auteurs, exportable *fi-lone* cinema, and neorealism. This means that our disciplinary expertise on topics less familiar to mainstream and cult cinephilia has the chance to find novel expression in videographic form and to fill some glaring gaps. Secondly, videographic criticism can help to attract students: the chance to make (as well as to study) audio-visual essays is an appealing one for many and may allow students to find an audience for their work much more readily than for the standard prose paper. Thirdly, the practice of videographic criticism can allow us more effectively to communicate and publicise our work beyond the academy, again potentially helping to increase enrolments but also helping to engage communities and constituencies without easy access to our prose scholarship.

## **The Modes and Venues of Videographic Criticism**

Videographic criticism is a fast evolving field comprising several approaches. In their 2016 survey and critique of current practice, Thomas van den Berg and Miklós Kiss offer the following summary taxonomy:<sup>3</sup>

### **(Annotated) excerpt**

Illustrative video embedded in an online discussion or digital book, functioning like the standard still or frame grab in a printed text. Such video can be commented on in the prose text, or may be annotated with graphics, text or voiceover superimposed on the video extract itself.

### **Supercut**

A thematic collection of clips that represent recurring tropes or patterns, for example, motifs or formal trademarks in a director's oeuvre.

### **Mashup**

A combination of clips from different audiovisual texts, perhaps with a more 'dialectical' intention than is the case with the accumulative procedure of the supercut.

### **Videographic analysis**

An audiovisual equivalent to the traditional prose essay or research paper, presenting an analysis and ideally accompanied with references and other scholarly scaffolding.

### **Video lecture**

Videos with an onscreen narrator guiding the viewer through a topic, with obvious analogies to the classroom situation.

### **Thesis videos**

Akin to the videographic analysis, but offering a strong thesis and often accompanied with authorial voiceover.

### **Adaptation**

A video in which an existing piece of critical writing is adapted into audiovisual form.

### **Personal documentaries**

Distinct from most of the previous types, a personal documentary features footage generated by the maker. Desktop documentary is a form of personal documentary that sources its material from the internet and from recordings of the essayist's computer screen.

Though the categories above are imprecisely defined and certainly overlap, they offer a rough guide to the range of audiovisual commentary on film and television being produced across academic and popular modes. Note though that the fact that this distinction between popular and academic modes is difficult to draw is a cause of regret for van den Berg and Kiss, the purpose of whose book is to establish a set of norms for audiovisual scholarship in the institutional context. Indeed, the survey they provide of current practices is designed also to regret the still inchoate outline of the 'academic research video' of their ideal. They articulate their central question as follows:

How can the traits and rhetoric of a traditionally text-based scholarly work, characterized by academic lucidity and traceability of information and argumentation, be optimally incorporated and streamlined into an autonomous, audiovisual container?<sup>4</sup>

Underpinning this question is a singular idea of proper scholarship in prose form: the authors assume that lucidity, argument and autonomy are characteristics universally cultivated in scholarly writing. They may even assume that ‘academic research video’ is less equipped for complexity than ‘text-based scholarly work’—otherwise why would ‘streamlining’ be necessary? These assumptions may be widespread but they are not universally shared. It is fair to say that some of the most active and respected practitioners of audiovisual scholarship within the academy would not agree that the ‘traits and rhetoric’ of the new analytic medium should constitute an act of remediation of the conventions of prose scholarship; nor would they conceive of the audiovisual medium as a ‘container’.

Christian Keathley, one of those who seek a new rhetoric rather than a translation of prose conventions into the audiovisual, has himself suggested a cruder but influential classification of videographic modes. Keathley distinguishes between *explanatory* and *poetic* approaches in the audiovisual essay,<sup>5</sup> and while he seems to suggest these approaches are in opposition, he also wants an ideal rapprochement between the two. He finds this rapprochement exemplified in the videoessay ‘What is Neorealism’ (2013) by kogonada [*sic*], which we discuss below.<sup>6</sup> For now, we note that Keathley’s key point is that the new technologies and temporalities of access to the audiovisual text (the ability to freeze-frame, play in slow motion and so on),<sup>7</sup> imply a new relationship to the material of analysis. This new relationship implies in turn the adoption of a new mode of analysis, or rather a poetic-explanatory blend that for Keathley has been latent and underdeveloped in the critical analysis of audiovisual materials hitherto.

Interestingly, Keathley makes the sensibility of the critic, or rather of the *cinophile* (he does not discuss television), the fulcrum of the practice he envisages. If the explanatory mode at its positivistic extreme tends to disavow the situatedness and subjectivity of the critic, further along the continuum towards the poetic pole the cinophile’s affective investment in the material becomes not simply the motor but the rationale of analysis. We dwell below on some of the problems resulting from the fact of the cinophile origins of much videographic practice. For we limit ourselves to pointing out that, as videographic criticism has developed, some of its most prolific and influential practitioners have foregrounded their own sensibility as, if not the meaning, then certainly the topic of the analysis undertaken. In the videographic work of a highly respected scholar such as Catherine Grant, for example, the video-essayist’s own spectatorship, or rather *retrospectatorship*—‘a viewing mode shaped by the experiences, fantasies and memories it elects in the spectator’—is her key theme rather than the texts she reworks using a variety of estranging techniques.<sup>8</sup> Grant’s work is celebratory, immersive, suggestive and (often) beautiful before it is enlightening or persuasive; some of the pieces she makes may seem slight in isolation, but her body of work is best taken as a whole, and constitutes an open-ended activity of practice research akin to an art practice rather than to some scientific undertaking in the narrow sense. Consistent with this is Grant’s conception of her work with film texts and editing software as a form of ‘material thinking’:

This kind of practice-led research knows not what it thinks before it begins; it is a coming to knowledge that is ‘not the awareness of a mind that holds itself aloof from the messy, hands-on business of work’, as Tim Ingold writes (following Heidegger), but, rather, ‘immanent in practical, perceptual activity’.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Grant's work is not intended to illustrate—still less elucidate—any argument; nor does it aim at critical autonomy, in that its frequently cryptic character seems to invite further commentary (often provided by Grant herself).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, to speak of one's activity in terms of material thinking or practice-led research is to refuse van den Berg and Kiss' idea of the academic research video as audiovisual container—at least if 'container' suggests some neutral vessel into which the critic's thoughts may be poured. To conceive of the activity of videographic analysis as material thinking is to allow agency to the source material and to the editing software even as it ascribes something like an artistic sensibility to the videographic critic. The idea of material thinking has, moreover, implications for pedagogical practice, because it implies that students are encouraged to investigate their chosen texts in a hands-on way rather than necessarily to construct an argument about them.

As already mentioned, the line between popular (and fan) and scholarly videographic activity is a porous one, and is often traced more by the venue of publication than by the content or even by the tone of a particular video-essay. Videographic work emerges mainly in online venues, with YouTube, especially, hosting video-essays perceived to be of the popular sort, while platforms like Vimeo—and to a much lesser extent, non-commercial platforms like [criticalcommons.org](https://www.criticalcommons.org/)—tend to host the work of those aspiring to scholarly recognition. Academic work finds a dedicated home in the online open-access journal *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, which was founded in 2014 and quickly became the most prestigious venue for videographic publication even as other journals have followed suit.<sup>11</sup> The academic intention is signaled in the context of *[in]Transition* by the creator statement that accompanies each video-essay, designed to articulate 'the research aims and process of the work as well as the ways in which those aims are achieved in the audiovisual form.'<sup>12</sup> The provision of a supporting statement is modelled after standard procedure for the articulation of research intent and content in university-based practice-research projects; more novel is the open peer-review process adopted by *[in]Transition*. Not only do makers know the names of their reviewers, the text of the reviews themselves are included in a parallel column on the webpage where the video-essay and creator statement are published. As such, the relationship between video-essay, commentary text, and peer reviews becomes a public and potentially complex one. Videographic scholarship is, here, a peculiarly hybrid thing, not simply multi-modal, but in a sense multi-author.

A growing body of commentary has accompanied the mainstreaming of videographic work in the academy. Key texts among the existing historical, analytical and testimonial scholarship include the multi-author volume, *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image*, edited by Chris Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant that we adopted as our textbook in our seminar at OSU;<sup>13</sup> the summative and prescriptive volume, already discussed, by Thomas van den Berg and Miklós Kiss, *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video*; and Chiara Grizzaffi's *I film attraverso i film: dal 'testo introvabile' ai 'video essay'*.<sup>14</sup> Notably, both the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies (JCMS)*, formerly *Cinema Journal* and *Screen*, two of the most internationally visible and respected journals of cinema and media studies, have dedicated special batches of short articles to audiovisual scholarship, in three cases focusing on teaching.<sup>15</sup> The most recent of these, the special section in the September 2019 issue of *Screen*, is 'aimed at instructors who might be interested in the prospect of replacing written assignments with audiovisual essays'.<sup>16</sup> In stated intention, at least, the ethos of the dossier is notably cautious: in his introduction, editor Matthew Solomon refuses the "'neologism' videographic criticism".<sup>17</sup> This is more than mere disagreement about

terminology: the avoidance of the open-ended 'videographic criticism' (which may indicate a range of activity not reducible to the essay form) is also, and explicitly, a refusal of Keathley's call, repeated in the co-written introduction to Keathley, Mittell, and Grant 2019, for a hybrid 'third form' between the poetic and the explanatory.<sup>18</sup> Solomon's warrant for such a refusal is the conservatism or perhaps the anxiety of students themselves. He prefers the term 'audiovisual essay' to 'videographic criticism' because the 'written form [of the essay] is generally familiar to students'.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, one of the contributions to the dossier is devoted to 'teaching avant-garde practice as videographic research'.<sup>20</sup> In that essay, Jennifer Proctor devotes particular attention to the value of experimental play in student projects, and we return to these below in the light of our own experience teaching our seminar at OSU.

Chiara Grizzaffi's monograph on videographic practice, *I film attraverso i film*, opens with a question that recalls Keathley's (and Laura Mulvey's) reflections on the new modes of access to the audiovisual text: 'In che misura le mutate condizioni materiali, di accessibilità e di disponibilità del film orientano i modi d'analisi? Nello scenario mediale contemporaneo, cosa possiamo fare con *i film per i film*?'<sup>21</sup> The book closes with the assertion that the videoessay represents 'una forma aperta, più inclusiva che prescrittiva, che si fa carico simultaneamente delle numerose istanze, talvolta contraddittorie e in conflitto tra loro, che l'analisi e la critica hanno portato avanti nel corso del tempo.'<sup>22</sup> Grizzaffi confirms, then, rather than regrets, the ludic and hybrid tendencies of videographic practice even as she finds a genealogy, or multiple genealogies, in the variety of historical film criticism. She does not, in other words, present a single scholarly mode as the preferred model for audiovisual scholarship, as van den Berg and Kiss hope to do.

Still, it is not unironic that Grizzaffi's monograph has first appeared in Italian (apparently a translation into English is planned) given the relative lack of videographic attention to Italian cinema and television. At the time of writing, *[in]Transition* has published on a few video essays with a focus on Italian film and media: Austin Fisher's 'Spaghettis in Translation' (2015), which sets the Italian western in the context of Japanese and Korean naturalizations of the genre; Jordan Tynes and Maurizio Viano's 'Frames of Mind' (2015) on the relationship of *Rome Open City* to neorealism; Albert Elduque's 'Hunger and Rotten Flesh: Cinema Novo, Pasolini, Eisenstein' (2016), on the Third Cinema idea of an 'aesthetics of hunger'; Alan's 'Occupying Time: The Battle of Algiers' (2019), on temporalities in the 1966 film; and kogonada's 'What is Neorealism?'.<sup>23</sup> Grizzaffi's own book mentions only three: one on Pasolini, one on Rossellini and kogonada's 'What is Neorealism' once again.

This may be too small a sample to definitively assert that academic video essays on Italian film, when these exist, tend to focus on auteurs or internationally recognised genres. Certainly, if you dig a bit deeper, and follow up the work of prolific video-makers like Pasquale Iannone,<sup>24</sup> you can find videoessays that treat topics such as female stars, female audiences, and male comedy stars, as is evident in the working list we have compiled of videographic criticism about Italian cinema and television.<sup>25</sup> But the impression that Italian cinema is a matter of directors and cult genres is confirmed when we look at key online venues, be they cinephile or scholarly in focus. One such is Audiovisualcy, a forum at Vimeo curated by Catherine Grant dedicated to 'video essays or works of audiovisual screen studies that have an analytical, critical, reflexive or scholarly purpose'.<sup>26</sup> At the time of writing, Audiovisualcy hosts more than 2,050 video essays; searches reveal a handful on Italian material. Here, we do find some videos on female stars (such as Sophia Loren), but primarily again on exportable genres including westerns and horror, and on auteurs (Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Paolo Sorrentino, Luchino Visconti, and Luca Guadagnino). The Italian auteur is also privileged on

the cinephile site Film Scalpel, which houses a page dedicated to seven videoessays which all or in part engage with the work of Antonioni.<sup>27</sup>

Given that so much videographic activity emerges from a cinephile ambit, perhaps it is no surprise that the picture of Italian cinema that emerges is one that confirms the canon and assumptions of world-cinema cinephilia and transnational cult viewing: the great male auteurs, exportable genres understood to have a masculine address, and of course neorealism. Indeed, it is striking that kogonada's 'What is Neorealism', a videoessay that sincerely reaffirms clichés about the status and character of neorealism long challenged in Italianist scholarship, has been made a key exemplar of videographic achievement. Using resources like multiple screens, on screen captions and reversed film, 'What is Neorealism?' brilliantly stages a comparison of Vittorio De Sica's *Stazione Termini* (1953) and the version of the film, *Indiscretion of an American Wife*, recut by producer David O. Selznick, in order to reveal what the videoessayist dubs a 'clash of sensibilities' between Italian neorealism and Hollywood. The rhetorical power of kogonada's videoessay is such that it was chosen for inclusion in the inaugural issue of *[in]Transition* in 2014, having already been published on the website of *Sight & Sound* the previous year.<sup>28</sup> Explaining the decision to include the videoessay, *[in]Transition* editor Christian Keathley presents 'What is Neorealism?' as a model to emulate, and suggests that it achieves the "'third form" of critical writing imagined by Roland Barthes' by 'effectively poeticiz[ing] its explanatory elements'. It works, Keathley writes, 'on two separate but interrelated tracks: the facts it gives us in the explanatory mode, and the atmosphere it creates as it poeticizes that information.'<sup>29</sup> We have no argument with the assessment of the formal achievement of 'What is Neorealism', but need to point how its rhetorical sophistication is put at the service of a tired opposition between a humanist realism and Hollywood's star machine and commercial priorities. As Catherine O'Rawe notes in a forthcoming piece, central to this opposition is a reification of neorealism, exemplified by kogonada's closing voice-over statement, 'To ask "what is neorealism?" is to ask "what is cinema?"' O'Rawe writes: 'The dichotomy that reifies and simplifies both "Hollywood" and "neorealism" also obscures the complexities, contradictions and impurities of neorealism itself.'<sup>30</sup>

From our perspective as researchers and teachers, the combination of, on the one hand, a partial and decidedly dated picture of Italian cinema and, on the other hand, the centrality of a reified and mythologized neorealism to a particular vision of world cinema, represents an opportunity. The intense scholarly activity on Italian cinema and television in the last two decades, which has broadened and deepened our knowledge of Italian cinema and television from a range of perspectives including with regard to neorealism itself, means that we have a rich store of topics and knowledge upon which to draw to contribute in novel ways to the growing field of videographic enquiry.

### **Teaching Videographic Criticism in Columbus**

In the edited volume we chose as our textbook for our 'Italian Film and Television and Videographic Criticism' seminar, Keathley and Mittell write that teaching videographic criticism represents 'a collaborative opportunity that is all too rare: working with students to develop the forms this nascent scholarly innovation will inhabit.'<sup>31</sup> We took seriously the suggestion that videographic criticism represents a precious collaborative opportunity, and so we invited ten scholars to work with us across the seminar by speaking to their research and creative work, asking them to deploy videographic criticism as the key lens through which to approach Italian and other material. Local experts from Ohio State were invited to present on the 'History and Modes of Audiovisual Criticism' (Ignasi Gozalo-

Salellas), 'How to Make a Videoessay' (Erik Scaltriti),<sup>32</sup> 'Videographic Criticism and the Digital Humanities' (Leigh Bonds), 'Videographic Criticism and Narrative' (Sean O'Sullivan), while Alan O'Leary presented on 'Film and History'. We were also fortunate to have several visitors from the US, Ireland and the UK join us virtually via video conferencing, to dialogue with us on topics such as 'Transnational Genre Films' (Rob Rushing, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), 'Media Materiality' (Elena Past, Wayne State University), 'Popular Feminism and Italian Screen Narrative' (Danielle Hipkins, University of Exeter), 'Deformative Videographic Criticism' (Jason Mittell, Middlebury College), 'Star Performance in Italian Cinema' (Sarah Culhane, Maynooth University), and the Spaghetti Western (Austin Fisher, Bournemouth University).<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned above, our ethos was experimental: we wanted to try things and themes out in the teaching, and not all (including the combination itself of things and themes tried) were destined to be wholly successful for the students.<sup>34</sup> The variety of topics and the variety of speaker expertise and disciplinary background meant that this was a seminar with a multiple (and maybe confusing) focus, and it pointed in many directions, including away from Italy and Italian cinema and television. The transnational dimension of the seminar was intrinsic to its form and content. The transnational was the explicit theme of two modules as well as being an explicit concern for some of the Italianist scholars who taught the seminar (Fisher, Rushing, Culhane); at the same time, other scholars teaching on the seminar might have had limited familiarity with Italian material. Rather than 'protecting' Italian material from some sort of disciplinary encroachment, we hoped that the students would use their developing understanding of the Italian context as a kind of heuristic to work through and assess the potentials of videographic criticism. Put more simply, we hoped that our graduate students could be encouraged to make their own videoessays on Italian cinema or television topics, though this was not obligatory; nor was it obligatory to make videographic work on *Italian* themes or texts. In any case, we made sure that the majority of the teachers were themselves practitioners: several (O'Leary, Fisher, Hipkins, Scaltriti and Culhane)<sup>35</sup> had made videoessays on Italian themes, and we studied these in seminar along with videoessays on non-Italian themes by others (Mittell and O'Sullivan). Our multiple foci meant that we were studying aspects of Italian cinema and television even as we were hearing testimony from practitioners about how videographic criticism on Italian themes and on cinema and television as such could be made. Too much, perhaps, but it was an exciting atmosphere and undertaking.

As mentioned, students were given the opportunity to make their own videoessays (ply supporting statement) in lieu of the traditional final seminar paper.<sup>36</sup> As relatively few videoessays have so far been made on Italian film and television, and as so many of those that have been made focus on a narrow set of topics, the seminar was an opportunity to take stock of, and (critically and/or creatively) to contribute to, a small but growing field. In the event, we were pleased and surprised that all of the students chose the creative option of making a videoessay for their final assignment (not all worked on Italian texts). This was the case even if we were not able to provide technical instruction and students had to choose, access and teach themselves an editing application; we did, however, encourage familiarity with editing software and the development of the conceptual and analytical approach to the final assignments by setting a series of 'parametric' videographic exercises for students to perform on their chosen film or television texts.

These exercises, borrowed from those taught at the Middlebury workshop and recounted in our seminar textbook as well as in another piece by Jason Mittell,<sup>37</sup> consist of applying certain strict parameters to the chosen text(s). In this way, the range of creative and analytical options is radically



narrowed so that (hopefully) the creator-scholar's anxiety at the manipulation of a new form is concomitantly reduced. An ingeniously simple example is the 'video PechaKucha': a video of sixty seconds consisting of ten video clips from a single audiovisual text, each lasting precisely six seconds and assembled with straight cuts (rather than dissolves etc.), with the audio being one continuous sequence from the same audiovisual text. Other exercises concerned voiceover and onscreen text, the latter in the form of an 'epigraph' from a work (academic or otherwise) that might cast light on the audiovisual material in thematic or dialectical ways. One student, Fiona Ward, developed her own clever variation of the 'first and final frames' approach associated with Jacob Swinney,<sup>38</sup> in order to find an economical means to speak about a whole television series. In two videos, she built intriguing sequences from the first and the final scenes of each episode from the first series of *Gomorra. La serie* (2014 -). This constrained formal investigation generated particularly telling discoveries about the use of architecture, ritual motifs and music in the series. It confirmed that parametric exercises are, as Keathley and Mittell write, akin to musical études: 'designed to teach a technical skill, but also with the potential to function as compelling cultural objects in their own right'.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, as Keathley and Mittell rightly point out, '*formal parameters lead to content discoveries*'.<sup>40</sup> Each of the students mentioned in this paragraph made interesting discoveries about their chosen texts and even created striking objects when performing the set exercises. Certainly, the exercises fed in to the final assignments, whether as useful first enquiries about a given theme or as experiments that revealed a feature of the film or series analysed, which in turn suggested a theme to be further explored. Lawrence Gianangeli overcame initial struggles with the technology to identify in his final project a queer dimension to the Dracula myth, which he achieved by juxtaposing (epigraph-style) a quote from Bram Stoker's novel with a series of clips from Dario Argento's *Dracula 3D* (2012). Engaging with Gaspar Noé's *Climax* (2018), Aleksandra Suslina undertook a 10/40/70 exercise. In this exercise, first developed for the analysis of film by Nicholas Rombes and subsequently adapted for videographic analysis by Jason Mittell, the shots that occur at the tenth, fortieth and seventieth minutes in the film (roughly corresponding to its beginning, middle and end) are juxtaposed sequentially.<sup>41</sup> Suslina's project pinpointed and encapsulated the frenetic development in the film from ecstatic dance to nightmarish bad trip. Similarly, Demetrio Antolini's powerful 10/40/70 exercise on Matteo Garrone's *Dogman* (2018) revealed a disturbing crescendo of violence and camera movement. Both this and Demetrio's final assignment on shot scale and framing in *Dogman* raised challenging questions about the ethics of re-presenting violent imagery, particularly when the parametric or poetic procedure seemed to discourage a contextualization that might mitigate the distressing effect of the footage. Michela Bertossa developed her concerns with female experience across a series of exercises and a final assignment on the first series of *L'amica geniale* (Saverio Costanzo, 2018), including an affecting voiceover exercise that superimposed recordings of her mother and grandmother reminiscing about life on Capri onto scenes from the island drawn from the series. In her version of the epigraph exercise, Michela powerfully interpolated snippets of a well-chosen quote from Sara Ahmed into a scene of female resistance and violent male response; she was able to expand on this in her final assignment by introducing further scenes from the series, and by developing the theme of resistance in terms of the series' own portrayal of female friendship and solidarity. In his videoessay on *Annihilation* (Alex Garland, 2018), Kevin Pementel worked with the film on its own terms, a process informed by Catherine Grant's model of 'retrospectatorship', discussed above.<sup>42</sup> Kevin's critical intervention was made through a telling but discrete rearrangement of images and dialogue to signal his own ambivalence about the film's seductive vision of a 'utopian apocalypse'.

Interestingly, although most of the students stated early on in the seminar that they preferred the explanatory mode of videographic criticism, and some repeated this preference in both the creator statements written to accompany the final assignment and in the seminar feedback, they all opted for a more poetic mode in their final essays—or at least (to adapt Keathley), they made videos that poeticized the explanatory elements. To put this another way, the students were less conservative in their own activity than in their discourse, and seemed keen to try the investigative mode even when their own ideas of ‘proper’ scholarship might have directed them to a less experimental approach. Perhaps the writing of the creator statements allowed some anxiety to be assuaged with the balm of scholarly reference and footnotes.

Student feedback for the seminar recognised how learning was enhanced by ‘hands-on experimentation’ and by the encounter with ‘unconventional academic material’, and how ‘the study of videographic criticism helped to engage more with the audiovisual aspect of cinema, instead of just with its content’. One student commented that the parametric exercises ‘help you to notice elements and patterns within the film that can point toward possible directions for your research.’ Certainly, in the future we would offer technical instruction and access to robust editing software. (Our assumption that students would be digital natives comfortable and familiar already with editing workflows was shown to be optimistic, and the inconsistent affordances of free software meant that one or two students regretted their choice of app.) But all the students’ final assignments demonstrated a genuine engagement with their material and a persuasive attempt to present their concerns in essentially audiovisual and videographic terms.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, let us restate our conviction that the relevant paucity of videographic material on Italian film and television represents an opportunity for Italianist scholars—something of course that will also be true for those working on many other non-anglophone cinemas.<sup>43</sup> And we envisage that videographic scholarship emerging from the ambit of Italian film and television studies can be distinct from, and potentially critical of, the cinephile seam of videographic criticism. The intense scholarly activity on Italian cinema and television in the last two decades means that we have a rich store of topics and knowledge upon which to draw to contribute in novel ways to the growing field of videographic enquiry, even as videographic methods offer us a tool of research for further enquiry. Our interlocutors, though, need not be limited to those within the academy: the relative ease with which videographic work can be made accessible online allows the possibility of effective communication to audiences outside the university. Videographic investigation is a tool of research, but can also be effective publicity for that research; as such, it can help with project of demonstrating the value of our scholarship to communities (and funders) beyond the academy, and can also help to attract students. Students who themselves make video-essays may be able, if they choose, to find an audience for their work much more readily than for the standard prose paper, and in that way may be enabled to address their own communities of origin, taste or identification. Finally, let us note that the model of the open peer-review process adopted by *[in]Transition* has powerful applications for pedagogical practice (students could review each other’s work), for scholarly collaboration (reviewing colleagues could explicitly signal the ‘what next’ for the individual work and for the field), and for public engagement (the *[in]Transition* format tends to elicit more disciplined and generous comment). Our own experience of teaching videographic criticism in the seminar at OSU demonstrated the appeal of the form for students, and confirmed its appeal for us as researchers and scholars.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘Scholarship in Sound and Image: Workshop on Videographic Criticism’ was first run in 2015, initially with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. See the workshop website at <http://sites.middlebury.edu/videoworkshop/> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>2</sup> See Jason Mittell, ‘Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method’, in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. by Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019) <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/b6dea70a-9940-497e-b7c5-930126fbd180> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>3</sup> See the chapter ‘Current Practice’ (<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/chapter-ii-current-practice>) where they embed or link to several examples of each type. Note that ‘videographic criticism’ is not the authors’ preferred term: van den Berg and Kiss reserve the term videographic criticism for a subset of their videographic analysis category that (they imply) compromises its scholarly charge through undermotivated aesthetic embellishment. Thomas van den Berg and Miklós Kiss, *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video* (Groningen: University of Groningen, 2016) <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/videographic-analysis?path=table-of-types-and-traits> [accessed 15 February 2020].

<sup>4</sup> van den Berg and Kiss.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Keathley, ‘*La Caméra-stylo*: Notes on video criticism and cinephilia’, in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, ed. by Andrew Klevan and Alex Clayton (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 176-91. ‘Kogonada’ is the nom de plume of E. Joong-Eun Park, a virtuoso videoessayist who has gone on to become a feature filmmaker.

<sup>6</sup> See the misleadingly entitled ‘Creator’s Statement’, by Christian Keathley, [*in*] *Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, 1.1 (2014) <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2014/02/28/what-neorealism-kogonada> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>7</sup> See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Grant, ‘Dissolves of Passion’, in *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound & Image*, ed. by Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant (Montreal: Caboose, 2019), pp. 65-83.

<sup>9</sup> Grant, ‘Dissolves of Passion’, p. 6

<sup>10</sup> See, again, ‘Dissolves of Passion’ for a good example of Grant’s reflective writing, in this case on the origins and experience of working on the video-essay of that title from 2014 (on *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945)).

<sup>11</sup> Other academic or cinephile journals wholly or in part dedicated to videographic scholarship include *Tecmerin: Revista de Ensayos Audiovisuales* (which focuses on Spanish and Latin American topics), *Sight & Sound*, *NECSUS*, *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, and *16:9 filmtidsskrift*. Online movie platforms or distributors like MUBI and Criterion increasingly feature videoessays to advertise films or directors in their catalogues, while Will DiGravio, at the time of writing a graduate student in film studies at Cambridge, has produced a podcast on videoessays, devoted mainly to interviews with distinguished practitioners, which at the time of writing has reached its fourteenth episode. See <https://thevideoessay.com/about/> [accessed 1 May 2020].

<sup>12</sup> See ‘Contribute to [*in*] *Transition*’, [*in*] *Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/how-it-works> [accessed 1 March 2020].

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<sup>13</sup> *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image*, ed. by Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant (Montreal: Caboose, 2019). The volume is also available open access at <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/contents> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>14</sup> van den Berg and Kiss. A useful earlier collection from 2003 is *Stuff it: the video essay in the digital age*, ed. by Ursula Biemann (Zurich and New York: Institute for Theory of Art and Design Zurich, 2003). Eric Faden, 'Manifesto for Critical Media' from 2007 discusses the 'media stylo' as an early form of the video essay. [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08\\_ManifestoForCriticalMedia.html](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08_ManifestoForCriticalMedia.html) [accessed 8 December 2019].

<sup>15</sup> See, 'IN FOCUS: Videographic Criticism', ed. by Christine Becker, *Cinema Journal* 56.4 (Summer 2017), 126-58; 'The Video Essay Assignment: Cinema Journal Teaching Dossier', ed. by Christine Becker and Erin Copple Smith, *Cinema Journal* 1.2 (Spring/Summer 2013). <<http://www.teachingmedia.org/the-video-essay-assignment-cinema-journal-teaching-dossier-vol-12/>> [accessed 1 March 2020]; 'Not Another Brick in the Wall: The Audiovisual Essay and Radical Pedagogy', ed. by Catherine Fowler, Claire Perkins, and Sean Redmond, *JCMS Teaching Dossier* 5.3 <http://www.teachingmedia.org/cinema-journal-teaching-dossier/> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Solomon, 'Audiovisual Pedagogies. Introduction: the inexhaustible text', *Screen*, 60.3 (2019), 449-54 (p. 449). In addition to the introduction, the dossier includes three contributions on topics such as methodologies, teaching avant-garde practices, and analytical and archive-based audiovisual essays. 'Dossier', *Screen* 60.3 (2019), 449-82. See also: Mittell, 'Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method'.

<sup>17</sup> Solomon, p. 450.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, 'Criticism in Sound and Image', *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound & Image*, ed. by Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant (Montreal: caboose, 2019), pp. 11-29 (p. 13). Here, the authors cite Barthes' discussion of a 'third form'.

<sup>19</sup> Solomon, p. 450.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Proctor, 'Teaching avant-garde practice as videographic research', *Screen* 60.3 (2019), 466-74.

<sup>21</sup> 'To what extent do the changed material conditions and conditions of accessibility and availability of films guide the methods of analysis? In the contemporary media scene, what can we do with film about films?' Chiara Grizzaffi, *I film attraverso i film: dal 'testo introvabile' ai 'video essay'* (Rome: Mimesis, 2017), p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> 'an open form that is more inclusive than prescriptive, which takes on the weight of diverse imperatives, sometimes mutually conflicting and contradictory, carried forward over time in analysis and criticism.' Grizzaffi, p. 207.

<sup>23</sup> The videoessays are found at the following web addresses: [mediacommons.org/intransition/2015/05/25/spaghettis-translation](https://mediacommons.org/intransition/2015/05/25/spaghettis-translation); [mediacommons.org/intransition/2015/03/12/frames-mind](https://mediacommons.org/intransition/2015/03/12/frames-mind); [mediacommons.org/intransition/2016/hunger-and-rotten-flesh](https://mediacommons.org/intransition/2016/hunger-and-rotten-flesh); [mediacommons.org/intransition/occupying-time-battle-algiers](https://mediacommons.org/intransition/occupying-time-battle-algiers) [all accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>24</sup> Iannone collects his videoessays at <https://vimeo.com/piannone> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>25</sup> The googledoc can be found at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1zzp-G7yk-BRwXriMTEEkvA5zIGfrEum7Qw5siC351cC4/edit?usp=sharing>. Colleagues are encouraged to add to our list.

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<sup>26</sup> 'Audiovisualcy' <https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>27</sup> The UK cinephile monthly *Sight & Sound* has for some years been hosting an annual roundup of the 'best video essays', as chosen by notable practitioners and critics. In the more than 200 videos mentioned in the 2018 poll, we identify five engaging principally with Italian film and media: 'Re-making Suspiria', 'When You Read This Letter', on Marco Bellocchio's *Buongiorno, notte*, 'Fantozzi, l'eterno ritorno', on the Italian actor Paolo Villaggio and his Fantozzi persona, 'Variations on a Scene', on Mario Bava's *Operazione paura* (1966), and 'The Night' on Michelangelo Antonioni's eponymous film from 1961. (Unsurprisingly, the Fantozzi video was chosen by Italian contributors to the poll: Chiara Grizzaffi and Daniela Persico, founder of online journal *FilmIdee.it*.) See <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/polls-surveys/best-video-essays-2018> [accessed 1 March 2020].

The 2019 poll mentioned 139 individual videos, and by our reckoning, four are concerned with Italian cinema to a greater or lesser degree. The supercut '36 Westerns Timed to First Gunshot' features five spaghetti westerns (and opens with motifs from Ennio Morricone), while 'Remake | Re-model – Suspiria (1977) vs Suspiria (2018)' dealt with Guadagnino's remake as part of a series on remakes for the website of the cinephile magazine *Little White Lies*. The poll included Alan's *[in]Transition* videoessay on *The Battle of Algiers*, but also, again, Antonioni, whose *Deserto rosso* had been used in the installation *Painting #3* by Ruth Baettig. See <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/polls-surveys/best-video-essays-2019> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>28</sup> kogonada, 'Videoessay: What is Neorealism', *Sight and Sound* (2018) <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/video-essay-what-neorealism> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>29</sup> Keathley's introduction to the videoessay, misleadingly entitled 'Creator's Statement', can be found at *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, 1.1 (2014) <http://media-commons.org/intransition/2014/02/28/what-neorealism-kogonada> [accessed 7 December 2019].

<sup>30</sup> Catherine O'Rawe, 'Italian Neorealism and the "Woman's Film": Selznick, De Sica, and Stazione Termini', *Screen*, forthcoming. We wish to thank Catherine O'Rawe for sharing this article with us in advance of its publication.

<sup>31</sup> Keathley and Mittell, p. 28, our emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Scaltriti's session was an introduction to the rhetoric of video-essays rather than to the technical aspects of videoessay making.

<sup>33</sup> [\[Link to syllabus to be provided\]](#)

<sup>34</sup> Following the conclusion of the seminar, we asked the students the questions set out below. Feedback was positive: though students regretted the absence of technical instruction, they commented on how the course allowed them to approach audiovisual material creatively and critically, while enabling them to pick up on elements or tropes in a film or a series of films than is the case with the traditional academic project (seminar papers). They also noted that this type of work also has the potential to speak to broad audiences outside of academia, and thus might have greater impact, while broadening traditional humanities scholarship.

1. What has the course revealed about the relationship of videographic criticism to other academic approaches?

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2. What do you think — now that you have completed the course — are the distinctive affordances of videographic criticism as such, and what are the distinctive affordances of any of its different modes (explanatory, poetic, parametric, deformative, desktop documentary etc.)?
  3. To what extent has the study of videographic criticism given you access to cinema (and to *Italian* cinema and TV in particular) in a novel way? Is the study of videographic criticism an effective way to engage with cinema and TV?
  4. Which videoessays you have seen have you found to be particularly striking or impressive? (We're particularly interested in anything on Italian film or TV.)
  5. Do you think you will make videoessays in the future?

<sup>35</sup> At the time of writing, the videoessays made by Hipkins and Scaltriti are not yet published, but see the following article for links to Culhane's work: Sarah Culhane, 'Street Cries and Street Fights: Anna Magnani, Sophia Loren, and the popolana', *Italianist*, 37: 2 (2017), 254–262.

<sup>36</sup> In the seminar syllabus, we describe the exercise as follows: 'Your videoessay can take any of the forms discussed during the course, including explanatory video, desktop documentary, poetic reflection, parametric or deformative, and so on... The supporting statement, which should be between 500 and 1,500 words, should articulate the research aims and process of the work as well as the ways in which those aims are achieved in the audiovisual form (format borrowed from *[In]Transition*).' We also suggested that the length of the video-essay not exceed ten minutes.

<sup>37</sup> The parametric exercises are detailed in the chapter 'Criticism in Sound and Image.' They include: the Videographic PechaKucha, Voice-over, Videographic epigraph, Multi-screen composition, and Abstract trailer. Keathley and Mittell, pp. 14–27. See also Mittell, 'Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method' for discussion of other parametric exercises including 10/40/70.

<sup>38</sup> Jacob T. Swinney, 'First and Final Frames', *Vimeo* (2015), <https://vimeo.com/122378469> [accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>39</sup> Keathley and Mittell, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Keathley and Mittell, p. 11, original italics.

<sup>41</sup> Mittell gives an account of the 10/40/70 exercise in 'Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method'. In Rombe's original version of the exercise three still images (rather than shots) were selected and juxtaposed for an analysis in prose which does not, however, restrict itself only to the details of the freeze frames. See Nicholas Rombes, *10/40/70: Constraint as Liberation in the Era of Digital Film Theory* (Washington: Zero Books, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Grant, 'Dissolves of Passion', p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> Interesting to note in this context the call for submissions for a special issue of *[in]Transition* devoted to 'African Screen Worlds in Conversation with Other Screen Worlds' recently launched by the 'Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies' project run from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. See <https://screenworlds.org/submissions/african-screen-worlds-in-conversation-with-other-screen-worlds/> [accessed 1 May 2020].