Scholarship in Sound & Image: A Updated White Paper

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Introduction/Background:

In June 2015, we hosted "Scholarship in Sound & Image," a workshop on videographic criticism, supported by an NEH Institute for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities grant, at our home institution, Middlebury College. The workshop was a huge success, as we reported in a white paper that year. The success prompted us to apply for another grant to host two more summer workshops, in 2017 and 2018. This report builds on our previous report to update the results of these subsequent workshops, and point toward the future of videographic criticism as a facet of digital humanities.

As with our first offering, our workshops benefited enormously from the collaboration of others: firstly, Ethan Murphy, the Media Production Specialist for Middlebury's Film & Media Culture Department, who continued to offer daily instruction and support on Adobe Premiere and associated software, as well as mentoring on videographic work. Additionally, we drew upon the talents of two excellent student assistants: August Laska in 2017 and Emma Hampsten in 2018. Both August and Emma joined us in leading group critiques and advising participants on work in progress, as well as managing life in the dorms for participants and helping build a thriving community of practice. In both years, we were joined in the second week by Catherine Grant

(University of London, Birkbeck), who is one of the foremost practitioners and scholars of videographic critics. Additionally, we enjoyed visits from four active videographic makers/critics, three of whom were alumni from our 2015 workshop: in 2017, Liz Greene (Liverpool John Moores University, UK) and Corey Creekmur (University of Iowa), and in 2018, Kevin B. Lee (Merz Academie, Stuttgart) and Allison de Fren (Occidental College). Along with their stimulating presentations, all visitors served as mentors on final projects. These visits, which came in the second week, just as we were all settled into our routines, served to jumpstart everyone's conceptual and work processes, further enriching the experience for us all.

Most importantly, we were fortunate to have two extraordinary cohorts of workshop participants. The 2017 workshop was designated for graduate students, and we welcomed Katie Bird (U of Pittsburgh), Lola Breaux Fernandez (U of Reading, UK), Nzingha Kendall (Indiana), Evelyn Kreutzer (Northwestern), Hoi Lun Haw (U of Bristol, UK), Derek Long (U of Wisconsin - Madison), Casey McCormick (McGill), Jenny Oyallon-Koloski (U of Wisconsin - Madison), Nicole Morse (U of Chicago), Marc Newman (UC Santa Cruz), Nike Nivar-Ortiz (USC), Sarah Ross (U of Washington), Jordan Schonig (U of Chicago), and Patrick Sullivan (U of Rochester). The 2018 workshop was designated for Ph.D. holders, ranging from post-docs to full professors; our excellent cohort of participants were Elizabeth Alsop (CUNY), Andrea Comiskey (Franklin & Marshall), Nathaniel Deyo (U of Florida), Susan Harewood (U Washington - Bothell), Lisa Henderson (U Mass), Maria Hofmann (Middlebury), Juan Llamas (U North Texas), Kathleen Loock (Freie University, Berlin), Neepa Majumdar (U

Pittsburgh), Hoang Nguyen (UC San Diego), Alan O'Leary (U Leeds, UK), Sean O'Sullivan (Ohio State), Matthew Payne (Notre Dame), Maria Pramaggiore (Maynooth, Ireland), Maria San Fillipo (Goucher), and Laura Serna (USC). As with the 2015 workshop, we received many more applications for a small number of workshop spots than we could accept, so we knew we were assembling an ideal group of participants; however, we were still overwhelmed by how both years yielded two distinct but tremendously productive communities of practitioners at the event that has become affectionately known as "videocamp." All of our participants and collaborators share responsibility for the workshops' collective success.

Our core approach to teaching videographic work did not change from 2015—we used a suite of exercises documented in our previous white paper and our book *The Videographic Essay* (caboose 2016), held sessions in our multimedia labs at Middlebury, and used Adobe Premiere Pro as our core software platform. As such, the rest of this white paper will focus on the minor changes we made in our workshop, as well as reflecting on the next steps for videographic criticism.

The Workshop Program:

Based on our previous experience, each workshop was divided into two parts. During the first week, we led participants in a series of parameter-driven exercises designed to introduce them both to the software they would be using, and to the practice of working (or more accurately, playing) with the moving images and sounds of their objects of study. Participants spent the second week working on a larger videographic

project within their scholarly area of expertise. Many of these were based on the projects that they had proposed in their applications, but all had reconceptualized their approach and some had even decided to start an entirely different project based on their first week experiences.

We kept quite close to our 2015 model for the first weeks of both subsequent workshops. Each participant chose a single work to use for their exercises as before; learning from previous experience, we discouraged participants choosing works that were too short (like a webseries) or silent film, as these had been difficult to work with in 2015. The participants selected a wide range of examples, including a larger number of non-English films, raising questions about the role of subtitles in videographic work. In 2018, a few participants had chosen films by politically marginalized filmmakers or explicitly "radical" texts—this prompted some engaging ethical conversations about the right for critics to "play" with such footage, potentially decontextualizing the films from their political positions and raising questions over who has the right to manipulate whose footage.

We kept three of the exercises identical to the 2015 workshop: the videographic PechaKucha, videographic epigraph, and multiscreen exercise. All three continued to be rewarding ways to develop technical skills, explore specific techniques, and make new discoveries about films. We changed the voiceover exercise slightly, as we found this was the exercise that participants struggled with most, as they tended toward more explanatory academic language rather than creating interesting interplay between a film clip and the spoken word. The new version of the exercise asked that "the voiceover

should relay an anecdote, tell a joke, read from some piece of writing, or otherwise provide an independent channel of material not overtly related to your film. The content can be your own original material or reading something others have written / spoken." This new language for 2018 yielded the most provocative crop of voiceover exercises, exploring associative and performative links between sound and image, and freed participants to truly experiment with the spoken word as an aesthetic element.

The most significant transformation in the first week was reframing 2015's least effective exercise, the "alternative trailer," into what we termed "the abstract trailer." Assigned on Friday afternoon and due Monday morning, this exercise created the bridge between the two weeks:

> *Produce a short (no more than 2 minute) abstract trailer of your final videographic project. This videographic abstract trailer should convey the topic, approach, and tone of your final project (per an article* ***abstract****), and relate to the form of the film* ***trailer*** *in some way. One key goal of this video is to make us want to see your final project. It might also function as a kind of "proposal" that will help you develop your final project. Think about parameters.*

This assignment effectively invited participants to marry the parameter-driven, playful approach from earlier exercises to the more intellectually-driven, formal research project they would undertake for the second week. Nearly all participants in 2017 and 2018 found that they had significantly reconceived the projects that they had proposed when applying to the workshop after a week of videographic exercises, and this abstract trailer allowed them to imagine their work in a new light. Many of the trailers were compelling

videos on their own terms as well, giving the participants pride in producing something that concisely and creatively expressed their own analytical perspectives after less than a week of videographic experience.

The abstract trailer assignment was one facet of the most significant overhaul we made from the 2015 workshop: restructuring how participants worked on their video essays in the second week. In 2015, we kept the structure quite loose and open in the second week, encouraging participants to make discoveries and explore their topics. While many people did make significant progress toward a publishable video, few had full drafts completed and some participants had nothing ready to share with the group by the end of the workshop. Our goal for 2017 was to have every participant produce a rough draft of a video essay, returning home with a project to polish and refine for publication.

In order to help participants produce a rough draft, we instituted far more structure for the second week. On Monday morning, we viewed everybody's abstract trailers, and then broke into "mentoring groups" of 3-4 participants, each led by Grant, Keathley, Mittell, or one of the visiting producers; these groups were constructed based on related topics, similarities in approach, and relevance for the mentors. The mentoring groups did "close viewings" of each trailer, talking through plans for the larger video project and engaging in peer critique. Mentors met individually with each member of their group on Tuesday to review progress and offer feedback, with the groups meeting together on Wednesday afternoon to view works-in-progress. Individual meetings were scheduled on Thursday as well, with a deadline of Friday at noon to upload a rough draft

for a large afternoon screening. Unlike in 2015, every participant screened a final video in 2017 and 2018, with most producing strong full-length drafts of their projects; the overall quality of these projects was exceptional, with participants left stunned at the amount of progress they made over two intense weeks.

We can see the results of this progress in the work that has been presented by participants since the workshop. Of the 14 members of the 2017 cohort, nine have had their videos published in *[in]Transition* with open peer reviewers praising their work; eight of those videos were listed on at least one ballot for *Sight & Sound Magazine*'s Best Video Essays of 2018 poll. Many 2017 participants have screened their video work at the Society for Cinema & Media Studies (SCMS) conferences over the past two years as well, and they report success in integrating their videographic work into their teaching and future research efforts. Thus far, one 2018 participant (Maria Hofmann) has had her work published in *[in]Transition* and it also won Best Video Essay at the 2018 Adelio Ferrero Film Festival. Another video from the 2018 workshop is forthcoming in *[in]Transition* later in 2019, and numerous others are currently under review or being finalized for submission. 2018 participants have also had their videos accepted for presentation at the SCMS Conference in Seattle and the International Society for the Study of Narrative Conference in Pamplona. Most participants have indicated that videographic criticism will continue to be a growing part of their professional life as teachers and scholars. And as with 2015, numerous workshop participants from 2017 and 2018 have called "videocamp" one of the most rewarding and influential activities in their academic careers.

Further Outcomes:

The first Scholarship in Sound & Image workshop yielded a published book, *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound & Image*, written by Keathley and Mittell, and published by caboose books in 2016. That book featured a detailed account of the workshop assignments with a supplemental Scalar site featuring samples of the videographic work discussed in the book. We have revised the book to account for the 2017 and 2018 workshops funded by this grant, updating exercise descriptions and expanding on many topics covered in our sessions. The new edition also includes a roundtable conversation between eight participants from the three workshops, reflecting on their experiences at the workshops and how they have incorporated videographic criticism into their careers. This edition will also publish reflections from established videographic practitioners Catherine Grant, Eric Faden, and Kevin Lee, as well as a discussion of copyright and fair use issues. It will be published in Fall 2019.

The workshops have also had a direct impact on scholarly communities. After the 2015 workshop, Mittell created a Facebook group called Videographic Roundtable to continue the community conversations among participants and beyond, sharing resources, works-in-progress, and opportunities for publication and presentation. The active group has grown to more than 230 members, yielding productive ongoing conversations and collaborations. Out of these discussions, Mittell worked to create the Digital Humanities & Videographic Criticism Scholarly Interest Group at SCMS, launching at the 2017

conference. In many ways, the greatest impact of the workshops has been the creation of scholarly communities and conversations that have outlasted each two-week session.

Even though our support from the NEH has ended, we are sustaining the work started in the workshops. We have developed a short mini-workshop to bring to university campuses, providing an intense two-day course in creating videographic criticism led by either Keathley or Mittell, modeled after the NEH workshop. Thus far, we have conducted these short workshops at Dartmouth College, University of Houston, Miami University of Ohio, University of Notre Dame, University of Utah, and University of Washington; we have been approached by numerous other universities in the U.S. and abroad, and we are looking to coordinate schedules to continue these offerings.

We still feel like the two-week intensive workshop is the best way to learn this mode of scholarship. Thus Mittell has developed a new program at Middlebury College: the Digital Liberal Arts Summer Institute (DLASI), a two-week tuition-driven residential program where participants come to Vermont to learn a specific approach to digital scholarship. Clearly modelled after the IATDH program, the DLASI will build on the infrastructure of Middlebury's renowned intensive summer programs (Language Schools, Breadloaf School of English) to create specific training opportunities in digital humanities. For June 2019, we are mounting our videographic criticism workshop as a pilot program for the DLASI, bringing 16 participants to Vermont to experience "videocamp" under this new model. If it proves to be successful, we hope to broaden future offerings to other topics beyond videographic criticism, per the expertise of Middlebury faculty and staff.