

'Teaching the audiovisual essay: a fully-fledged essay'

Article

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Gibbs, J. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0876-1798>
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TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

A Fully-fledged Essay

Context of the assignment

This assignment is from a final year undergraduate module – or course, in American parlance – which I have delivered eight times in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading. The assignment in question is the second assessment point on Videographic Criticism: prior to this, the students have completed four exercises inspired by the Middlebury model, from which they selected one – which they could improve in the light of class discussion – to submit for the first assessment.

The second assessment is a fully-fledged essay. After the tight parameters of the exercises, the guidance for the essay is deliberately broad, inviting a range of forms of essay-making and welcoming submissions of varying duration ('between three and ten minutes'), as appropriate to the approach employed. As well as engaging with the variety of work in the contemporary videographic field, the students' work is supported by guided peer feedback, both on their developing ideas and on a screening of work in progress. The submission deadline, and the final feedback session, are scheduled after the vacation that follows the term / semester in which most of the module is delivered, enabling maximum time for

developing what represents a significant piece of work.

The assignment also offers the alternative of a written essay for anyone who might have decided videographic work wasn't for them, though this has rarely been taken up. The module, and the assignment, found a natural home in the context of a set of degree programmes that have been carefully designed over many years to bring practice and critical / theoretical / historical thinking together, and elements of the brief draw on approaches to documenting practice and conducting close analysis that characterise other parts of the student experience.

The Assignment

FT3VC: Assessment 2: You should submit EITHER **A: an audiovisual essay** (with or without accompanying reflective documentation) OR **B: a written essay**.

A: Audiovisual essay

- The essay should be between three and ten minutes long.
- It does not have to take a particular form (the module has been deliberately designed to enable you to encounter a wide range of videographic approaches). It should contain analysis / an argument (though this does not have to be in the form of a voice-over).
- You also have the **option** of submitting an accompanying reflective written statement. Some of you will feel that your audiovisual essay speaks for itself. Others may wish to write an accompanying document (of up to 1500 words) which provides:
 - » An examination of the critical issues which inform the project
 - » A reflection on your critical and creative decision-making
 - » An analysis of one moment in the audiovisual essay to demonstrate the complexity of its argument, analysis, form and mode of address.

[If you are keen to create a video essay which explores **a topic** in film / television criticism, theory or history **across more**

than one film / television programme, this is possible but you must discuss your idea with John and have it approved before starting work on the project. For the most part, this question imagines that you will work on the film / programme you have been working with so far on the module.]

B: Written essay (4000 words)

Analyse a sequence from the film / television programme you have been working on in the module, making clear how decisions shape the sequence's effects, and discuss the relationship between the sequence and the film / episode as a whole.

Your essay should also include reflection on what you have learned about your film / programme as a result of creating the series of videographic exercises, and on how videographic approaches may have shaped your analysis and approach. What has videographic criticism taught you about close analysis?

Reflection

Students have responded to the flexibility of the assignment with a wide range of work, representing different points on the continuum between the explanatory and the poetic. This selection features two audiovisual essays which are more obviously poetic, and one which is emphatically explanatory while at the same time formally highly sophisticated:

- [Temporal Ghosts](#) by Enrique Saunders. This version of Enrique's essay was published in Tecmerin, following peer review and a little bit of reworking, though it is very similar to the version submitted on the module in 2018/19. (You can also see his exceptional videographic epigraph, submitted for assessment 1, [here](#).)
- [Hannibal – A Serial Art Exhibition](#) by Dara Bolaji. Dara's degree was combined honours in Art and Theatre, and she imaginatively drew on the form of the blog which Art students at Reading produce to support their studio projects and demonstrate the research that has underpinned their exhibited work. Further to her credit, Dara completed this project during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020.

- [The Act of Looking in Moonrise Kingdom](#) by Ellen Francis: Ellen's 2019 essay, representing the explanatory end of the continuum, is highly inventive and critically sophisticated, engaging in varied formal play highly appropriate to the subject and integral to the expression of its ideas.

Over several iterations of the module, I made various improvements: inflecting the weighting for each assessment point, and developing specific marking descriptors for both audiovisual essays and for the exercises. Of greatest relevance here, the first time the module was delivered everyone had to submit an accompanying written statement — thereafter, it became optional. This change was implemented because most of the work submitted had very effectively made its arguments without any need for supporting discussion. But it was also because the students had put so much energy into producing their arguments videographically that they had little motivation for producing a complementary written piece. The optional written statement remains for the benefit of anyone wishing to establish the formal or conceptual complexity of what they have achieved, or for makers working in the poetic traditions of the field where modes of address can be more akin to an artwork, and where further reflection or analysis might therefore be appropriate.

The module has been extremely well received by the students, and they have produced some wonderful work – choosing only three examples was a challenge. If one constructive criticism has recurred in end-of-module feedback, it has been to suggest that the encounter with videographic criticism should happen earlier in the degree programme, as students wished to deploy the skills the module helped them to develop in other parts of their studies. My colleagues and I responded to this when updating our portfolio and integrated the exercises into a module available to all students as they start the second year of their degree; this equips more students with videographic skills, and enables them to develop audiovisual essays on modules addressing a range of topics later in the programme.

JOHN GIBBS

John Gibbs is Professor of Film at the University of Reading. His publications include *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (2002), *Filmmakers' Choices* (2015, 2006) and, co-edited with Douglas Pye, *Style and Meaning* (2005) and *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017). His video essays have been published in *Alphaville*, *[in]Transition*, *Movie*, *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* and *NECSUS*.