

CRITICS AND MAKERS BY MARIA A. VELEZ-SERNA

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One of the most recalcitrant habits I acquired from my film studies education is the tendency to refer to films as “texts.” That structuralist abstraction has its role, but the work of arranging words and that of assembling images are very different practices. People who write about films and people who make films based on the written word know very well that they are incommensurable. The videographic work that [in]Transition publishes allows for authors to think “in the original language,” as they say one should do with philosophy. But as this point has been made so much more eloquently before, I focus here on one observation regarding the practice of peer-reviewing videographic work.

Having submitted one piece and reviewed another one for [in]Transition, I got to thinking about the perceived completeness and finality of a short film as compared to an academic article. Peer reviewers are asked to comment on both the video and the supporting statement. On publication, a note accompanies some of the videos, explaining that the version available is an amended one—it has been revised in response to peer review. Amended videos are in the minority, but academic papers rarely get published without revision. This is not to suggest that the journal’s standards are lax, but perhaps that we approach the task of reviewing differently. Film scholars are used to writing about films we cannot change, only critique. The presence of the reviewers’ statements next to the published videos at [in]Transition positions this writing as a kind of public film criticism rather than the closed-circuit rhetoric of traditional peer reviewing.

In contrast, as many of the reviewers are also part-time filmmakers, it may be that their awareness of the pragmatic aspects of video production and editing makes them more reticent to suggest changes. I confess I was very glad not to have to revisit my video after submission, as that would have involved trying to book an editing suite (not everybody has a MacBook), scheduling scarce time with my coauthor, and dealing with the disarray caused by even a little trim or an extra insert. As a reviewer for Miriam Ross and Jonathan Mines’s 3-D “Stereotowns,” the tone of my suggestions regarding the video

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was much more tentative than those I made regarding the supporting statement.¹ I was already primed to accept the audiovisual work on its own terms, as a groundbreaking experiment that had already pushed the boundaries of my technical competency. I waited for weeks to watch it as I tried find a virtual-reality headset I could borrow or, failing that, a pair of anaglyph specs. The anticipation, the novelty, and the music all enhanced the sense of consistency and persuasive power of the video. Emotions are always part of academic argument and peer review; video essays complicate this by engaging us through cinematic techniques, and thus activating modes of reception associated with cinema. Therein lies much of their pleasure but also their relative closedness.

Opening up the film by cutting it up, reassembling it, and rearticulating it is one of the exciting promises of videographic scholarship. That oscillation between critic and maker engagements with film is starting to generate its own practices. Online collaborative video editing is as commonplace in the industry as collaborative writing is in academia, so perhaps we will start seeing “tracked changes” on draft video projects as open-review models come into their own. A critical videographic project requires a third cinema–style skepticism about the finality of any edit, without stalling the need to show and discuss it.

Our video essay “Joining Up” was a spin-off of a paper David Archibald and I had published in NECSUS.² We have shown the video at festivals and bars, and it has been shared and liked on social media; it has been a small but meaningful intervention in the very political arena of the World War I centenary commemorations in Scotland. Videographic work situates scholarship in the contexts where film is shown, online and off, and thus enters the kinds of discussion and critique that characterize each site. [in]Transition’s activation of a peer review practice reclaims for this work the generosity that underpins academia and online culture as a prefigurative space that resists the takeover of the public sphere by competitive hostility. This practice of openness and experimentation may be just what we need to retrain our textual habit.

¹ Miriam Ross and Jonathan Mines, “Stereotowns” (review by Maria A. Velez-Serna) [in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies 3, no. 2 (2016): <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/stereotowns>.

² David Archibald and Maria A. Velez-Serna, “Joining Up: Scotland, Cinema and the First World War,” [in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies 2, no. 3 (2015): <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/2015/07/29/joining-scotland-cinema-and-first-world-war>; and Archibald and Velez-Serna, “Kilts, Tanks, and Aeroplanes: Scotland, Cinema, and the First World War,” NECSUS, December 4, 2014, <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/kilts-tanks-aeroplanes-scotland-cinema-first-world-war/>.