

Multimedia Integration and the Future of Scholarship

Cinema Studies scholarly practices have changed with the development of viewing and film producing technologies. Viewing platforms are so varied in current time that access to a wide range of moving images is more widespread than ever before. As in with any academic field, the digitization of scholarly content has sped up the processes of scholarly production, facilitating access to other works and research strategies. However, Eric Faden sees film academia as moving backwards in the development of communication stages, as traditions have dictated the form through which works are put into contact with their addressees. According to him, “we are interested in film, video, and new media (electronic culture) but publish essays (alphabetic culture) and, even worse, we take these essays to conferences and *read them aloud* (oral culture).” For one reason or another, film scholars have been reluctant to adopt digital resources in the *production* and *presentation* of their scholarly works. For Stephanie Barish and Elizabeth Daley, “to be literate today, one must understand how strategically chosen and juxtaposed combinations of media enable the construction and dissemination of meaning in ways that bypass or enrich traditional text and the spoken word” (39). This paper discusses the current scene of multimedia scholarship in the field and what the challenges and benefits of the integration between media and text are.

I argue that oral transmission has always been the most beneficial one in facilitating the production of knowledge. What oral traditions have to offer is precisely a more volatile, yet livelier transmission of knowledge and information. Digital scholarship brings to the written form the potential of social configuration with the addition of live comments and collaborative production that mimic oral communication. As it

incorporates an increasingly mutant form, born-digital scholarly content that is published *live* requires careful preservation considerations, such as the importance of maintaining different versions of the same work, or of guaranteeing the integrity of internal and external contents.

Despite the many benefits technology has brought to the field of cinema studies,¹ scholars seem to resist embracing the potential digital technology could have in their scholarship practices. Traditionally, film scholars are used to (having been accordingly trained) describing moving images by using heavily charged constructs from film language and form. Through the description of moving images, scholars certainly have the ability to conveniently emphasize features that will support their argument while leaving contradictions unmentioned. In books and journals, descriptions sometimes follow illustrative stills – which, it goes without saying, also support the author’s argument. In multimedia scholarly articles, authors have the option of inserting clips – that is, of moving images – in replacement of or in addition to traditional photo stills. Yet, this formal change can only take place at the expense of an adaptation of content, and of scholarly practices. Are film scholars not yet ready to give up the flourished language they have been using to describe films and scenes now potentially readily available through the innumerable online streaming platforms functioning today? Or have they simply not noticed the opportunity to incorporate into their analytical works the very object they analyze?

There have been some efforts in the more strictly academic market to stimulate the production of multimedia scholarship, but they are rather scarce and incipient. The

¹ See, for instance, Mulvey.

journal *Framework*, for instance, has recently used its website to publish an article embedded with video clips. J. Ronald Green, in the article in question, writes about Oscar Micheaux's sound films. This multimedia article is exemplary precisely in that it gives immediate access to clips of Micheaux's films (Figure 1), many of which were considered lost for many decades or are still not widely available for viewing.



Figure 1 Series of frame enlargements that illustrates Green's article. The four-frame image attempts to translate the actual moving quality of the frames in their original format.

The article, since written for a journal that publishes hard-copy issues in addition to having an online presence, presents a hybrid – almost redundant – formal quality, for it also uses series of still photos as illustrative of moving images (Figure 2). This redundancy is obviously compensating the impossibility of the journal's print copy to publish the embedded videos, replaced then by the series of frame enlargements. The use of video clips serves, in Green's article, two main purposes: first, it allows the addition of sound to the visual experience that still images would have provided (especially

important given Green's focus on Micheaux's *sound* films); second, as previously mentioned, it gives the viewer immediate access to snippets of his films.



Figure 2 Clip from Micheaux's *The Girl From Chicago* (1932). The audiovisual experience is enabled by *Framework*'s online presence. (Note the player's streaming bar.)

Framework, however, stands almost alone as a film and media print journal experimenting with multimedia scholarship. Although the most important film publications today have a digital life either as a web presence or through the digital preservation of published articles, very few of them make use of the possibilities of digital formats, like *Framework* started to do. UCLA's journal of cinema and media studies, *Mediascape* publishes content exclusively online, facilitating the integration between written text and audiovisual media. Many articles in the journal actually embed YouTube videos, using external links for their streaming – this approach risks the potential loss of the link if the video is taken down by its original provider. *The New York Times*, in turn, has experimented with multimedia publication in different ways, varying

from slideshows that give illustration to articles to video-only publications (no text). The case of *The New York Times* is especially uncommon because its website is strikingly different than its printed editions: the many videos used to enhance film reviews, for instance, can only appear online. Moving away from the text-video integration constantly used by film critics with the “Anatomy of a Scene” feature, the newspaper’s magazine (*The New York Times Magazine*) has recently published online a video gallery of actors playing different screen types, with no text (Figure 3).

Yet, online presence of scholarly journals does not guarantee their publishing of multimedia scholarship. Australian film journal *Senses of Cinema*, which publishes only online, does not use moving image as illustrations, or links to relevant websites within the articles. It also only publishes quarterly, with submission dates cut off per publication cycle. Similarly, David Bordwell’s blog *Observations on Film Art* refrains from using moving images, although the articles are drenched with frame enlargements and publicity stills for visual effect. Bordwell and *Senses of Cinema* exemplify a group of publications that embrace a digital presence without fully using all of its potential.

Multimedia scholarship can set forth an interactive, non-linear academic setting. This is already the case in media websites such as *MediaCommons* and *InMediaRes*, where readers, authors and editors alike engage in an ongoing discussion over the chosen weekly topic; they also use videos as central to the topic, or as illustrations. Although this interactivity is virtually only available through the use of web browsers, with the proliferation of digital books, it is possible that digital reading platforms will in the near future be able to stream videos embedded in articles and books, as well as to allow

readers to share comments amongst themselves, and possibly with the authors.² Digital books can benefit from immediate updates and editions without having to wait for a new batch of print bound books to come out.

Digital scholarship also allows authors to increase the proximity between the reader and the subject in question, by including moving images, or full data sets that support their argument. For instance, Annette Kunh's book *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, in which she interviews tens of elders about their childhood memories as they relate to British cinema-going experience in the 1930s, could have benefited from the possibility of publishing data sets and audio tracks of the interviews as addenda to her argument. With the availability of data sets and full video clips, the process of selection becomes equally relevant for the work, but the potential to give readers access to the bulk of the author's sources eliminates the contention of knowledge through the proprietary holding of information.

² As an early demonstration of reader interactivity, Amazon has already incorporated in its product a "feature that identifies the passages that are most highlighted by the millions of Kindle customers."



Figure 3 A text-free publication by *The New York Times Magazine*. Each image is a hyperlink to a performance video.

Practices of multimedia scholarship require a shift in the rhetorical mode (Faden) from argumentative and conclusive texts to essays that stimulate debate and retroactive argumentations. This scholarship emphasizes presentation in detriment of mere description, and its curatorial aspect is crucial for its high quality. We are still learning how to properly integrate moving images without text- or content redundancy or unnecessary use of different media. To the content, multimedia features add a form that must be carefully constructed, especially if the ultimate product is non-linear. In Faden's

words, multimedia scholarship “takes on an aesthetic function,” but it does not replace traditional written scholarship.

Moreover, according to MacDougall, in distinguishing written and visual ethnographies, “writing can give theoretical causal explanations, but a film can only suggest causal relationships within a given context” (75). In other words, moving images as illustration of a written text can, at the same time that they support a leading argument, free the viewer from the author’s frame and open up a space for discussion and/or counter-argumentation – which is valuable insofar as the author’s argument can be indeed proved or supported by illustrations. An important step in the production of multimedia scholarship, according to Barish and Daley, is to “conceive scholarly work that will be intellectually stronger because of the use of multimedia – that is, work that not only employs but *requires* multimedia” (40).

Yet, because multimedia scholarship cannot exist in the physical domain, it poses difficult challenges to preservation and publishing practices. First, archiving websites – the most common platform in which multimedia scholarship can be published – is in itself challenging due to the array of internal and external links under one domain. Library of Congress’s Archive-It project, which uses frequent URL crawls and occasional web-wide snapshots, is fairly successful at preserving the content of websites, but seldom fails in reproducing the original layout and integrity of the links. Maintaining the integrity of the links and of videos or audio tracks is crucial for preserving the integrity of the multimedia project itself.

Preservation issues also inform publishers’ apparent reluctance to embrace multimedia scholarship, since adopting its practices pose challenges to the preservation of

a piece's integrity. Other aspects contribute to the hampering of more common publication channels for multimedia scholarship: how to publish multiple versions of the same work, or how to constantly update an essay; conforming to MLA standards for citation; complicated copyright issues with using and streaming of videos, as well as adopting a standard fair-use practice, amongst many others. Publishers must also allow multimedia to play a central role within articles, instead of the traditional supportive role of images, diagrams, charts, etc.

The most challenging step to creating the new kind of scholarship multimedia features enables is to break with the traditional ways of thinking about scholarship. In most cases where there is use of multimedia features, articles usually show a slight disconnect between content and illustrations. Multimedia scholarship also needs to be given more attention from academia, whose traditions have hampered its development and dissemination amongst scholars. At NYU (as in most institutions), Cinema Studies masters and doctoral students must submit their final projects in written, printed format only – defining, thus, what constitutes research, scholarship, format, and presentation.³ While I write only about the inclusion of different media on written text to enrich cinema studies scholarship, an online publication, *Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular*, pushes the envelope as it guarantees a site for the exchange of truly multimedia projects, based mainly on interactivity and non-linearity.

³ In a similar way, according to Barish and Dale, “while researchers in many fields may be ready to acknowledge that they could vastly extend the scope of their scholarship through multimedia, nearly all fields lack refereed journals that would allow publication in multimedia formats that could be taken into consideration for promotion and tenure decisions” (41).

The creation of multimedia scholarship requires the author's commitment to the form, and active involvement in cataloging decisions and changes made to the project. Whether film scholars have been reluctant to adopt digital media in scholarship due to lack of institutional incentives or to a discomfort with the challenges it poses to traditional scholarship is less relevant than the problem of democratizing such practices. In order to avoid, or decrease, the "digital divide"⁴ between digital literate and illiterate scholars. The academic world must adapt its premises to welcome the possibilities enabled by digital and multimedia scholarship. Once publication sites are more established, and multimedia literacy is more widespread and produced, this new scholarship can take new and unprecedented forms, perhaps shifting for once the way we acquire and transmit knowledge.

⁴ I borrow this term from Barish and Daley (42).

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