Aesthetic Encounters with Anthropology: Contemporary Film and Experimental Ethnographic Practice

KASHMIRA MOHAMED ZAGOR

Reading to see? Textual dominance in anthropology

Throughout my undergraduate anthropology degree, the scope of ethnographic material I engaged with was broad and diverse. For three years, each subject would assign its class two written pieces of ethnography or relevant theory a week. As students, we read horizontally, dipping into these textual works of many different anthropologists, gaining small insights into the lives of their interlocutors and often, the interiorities of the ethnographers themselves. What was curiously absent from most of these subjects was any other form of ethnographic representation; the textual dominated, relegating anything else to the margins. Not only were textual ethnographies the most commonly drawn upon source of anthropological inquiry, but discussion of visual anthropology – its history, theoretical basis and practice – was also limited.

Why this omission, this gap in our education? There is still a hesitance within traditional university institutions to engage with more experimental, artistic forms of ethnography. As Anna Grimshaw (2021, p. 60) writes, there is "a lack of spaces in the academy for the sort of critical practice that lies at the heart of art school culture." In this paper, I make a case for bringing visual anthropology, particularly ethnographic *film,* from the periphery of our pedagogical experiences closer to the centre. There is much to see and learn from visual anthropology that cannot be communicated in the same way solely through written text. This paper looks at the sensory potential of ethnographic film, the aesthetic value that artistic forms can give to ethnographic content and the ability of filmmaking to produce a more ethical process of ethnographic representation.

A brief historical overview

Ethnographic film has had a place in anthropology since the discipline first formed (Pink 2003). As a branch of the social sciences that at first sought to establish itself as a legitimate 'scientific' field, visual media provided useful 'authentic' data collected from fieldwork sites. Even early pioneers in the field, such as Bronislaw Malinowski (whose written ethnography dominates university curriculums), were interested in visual modes of representation (Pink 2003, p. 7). This eventually shifted, as the positivist approach loomed large: suddenly, visual anthropology became too 'soft'. It is difficult to track the exact historical lineage of visual anthropology's development. This is because globally, different movements and paradigms inspired different approaches to visual ethnography. In the Australian context, for example, ethnographic film served a political purpose during the 1970s and 1980s as a way of elevating Indigenous perspectives and legitimising political claims to land and culture (Loizos 1993).

Until the 1980s, ethnographic film remained largely faithful to its origins – scholars (Jarvie et al 1983; Pink 2003; Gill 2020) often write of the voyeurism, the lack of reflexivity and the overall failure to adequately give 'voice' to ethnographic subjects that permeated these films. By the 1980s, anthropology was experiencing its 'crisis of representation' – during this turn, "ethnographic film emerged as a subjective and reflexive genre" (Pink 2006, p. 12). Guided by this reckoning, James Clifford and George Marcus published their seminal text *Writing Culture* (1986), a book which brought into relief issues of (mis)representation, lack of reflexivity and positivist thinking which have plagued anthropology since its genesis. Interestingly, although this book fundamentally critiques 'realist' ethnographic writing and calls for a shift towards more experimental forms of ethnography, it still re-centres text as the dominant mode of ethnographic expression. Moving forward, it is useful to consider how visual anthropology has the potential to remedy these concerns around representation in a way which resists defaulting back to textual ethnography.

Visual over textual? Sensory encounters with ethnography

What can the visual achieve that the textual cannot? As Paul Stoller (1997, p. 132) writes, "because of their literalness, academics are often the last people to stumble on innovation. For inspiration… turn to the arts." Something of note is the sensory potential of ethnographic film. Increasingly, there is a push for "taking the senses seriously in anthropological encounters with alterity so as to formulate sensory anthropology as a form of critical practice" (Cox, Irving & Wright 2016, p. 19). Not everything that happens in the field can be accounted for using words. There is a way of translating ethnographic experiences and cultural interpretations that do not rely on linguistic expression alone – ethnographic film can explore this. As Stoller (1997, p. 78) writes, "image makers have the power to provoke audiences sensuously, triggering an array of powerful cultural memories." Culture, knowledge and other modes of engagement with the world are often embodied or sensory – these can be captured or even transferred by the anthropologist to their 'audiences' through visual mediums.

There are other forms of anthropological scholarship exploring the sensory potential of practices such as dance (see Lentell 2021) and cooking (see Allen 2021 and McPherson 2021), which can engage other senses such as touch and taste. Ethnographic film is naturally limited to the engagement of only two senses, sight and sound – the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab is a project dedicated to pushing the boundaries of what these two senses can do for anthropological investigation.

Sensuous explorations in focus: The Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab

In 2006, Harvard University created a collaborative project between their anthropology and visual arts departments – they called it the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL). Headed by filmmaker and academic Lucien Castaing-Taylor, "SEL encourages attention to the many dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, that may only with difficulty, if it all, be rendered with words." This statement, which appears on the homepage of their website, captures the Lab's interest in moving beyond textual forms of representation and towards more

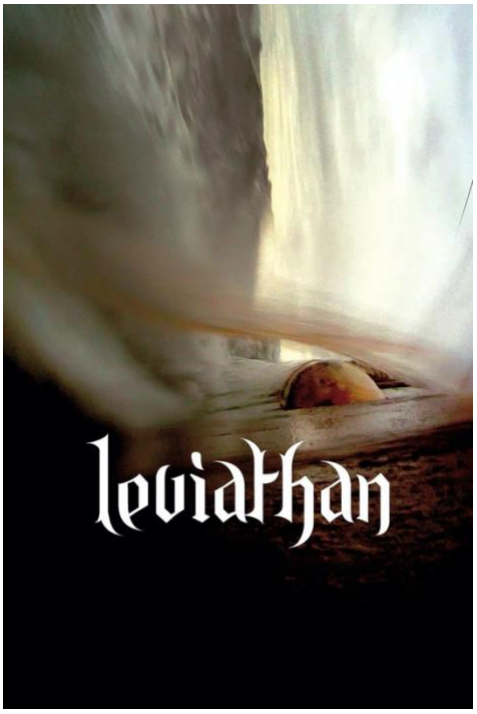

Figure 1 – poster for *Leviathan* (2012)

experimental, artistic mediums. Trailers for a handful of SEL's standout films from the past seven years can be found here.

What is important about the SEL is that it takes ethnography as an academic pursuit seriously, but sees sensory, artistic expression as equally valuable. Works produced by SEL demonstrate how form and its entanglement with the sensory can be used to reinforce the content of an ethnographic film. *Leviathan* (2012), directed by Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor is an ethnographic account of commercial fishing, shot entirely on a boat which operates off the coast of Bedford, Massachusetts. It is a film which "offers not information but immersion." There are no voice-overs to provide context, no interviews to latch onto for clarity – the 'speaking' happens through the dizzying shots captured on handheld cameras, showing the viewer in visceral detail the violence and precarity of being out at sea. Here, the aesthetic form serves the content – the shots are erratic and are often filmed from a 'point of view' perspective, allowing the audience to experience first-hand the destabilising reality of the lives of those performing this type of labour. What *Leviathan* captures is a sense of immediacy, an unmediated glimpse into how it might *feel* to work on a fishing trawler.

It is valid to argue that leaning too deeply into the sensory element of ethnographic film may mean that other important components of ethnography – such as the responsibility to ethically represent and interpret alterity – may be neglected. Christopher Pavsek (2015, p. 8-9) muses on this very sentiment in relation to *Leviathan,* writing:

> "Is it an abdication of aesthetic, intellectual, and political responsibility if one refuses to provide an interpretation of the world viewed, and instead leaves the viewers to makes sense of that world on their own terms, and perhaps thereby leave them to project onto that world a whole host of preconceptions with which they approach the film?"

This criticism holds weight, and should be carefully considered when approaching ethnographic film in both theory and in practice. Castaing-Taylor has commented on this issue, although he is cautious of the argument that anthropologists can ever have true understanding of the 'Other.' During an interview, the filmmaker comments: "clarity for me is an illusion, a product of a certain kind of cultural textology" (in Cox, Irving & Wright 2016, p. 154). For him, the valorisation of textual ethnography is entangled with a problematic desire within anthropology to claim authority over cultural interpretation. There is value in uncertainty, in reckoning with what can never be fully known or understood. There are, however, other filmmakers who recognise the potential pitfall of misrepresentation and have developed alternative mechanisms for managing it.

Figure 2 – shot from *Leviathan* (2012)

'Speaking nearby': Towards a more accountable ethnographic practice

Beyond the sensory, ethnographic film has the potential to create what Faye Ginsburg (2018) terms an 'aesthetics of accountability.' In effect, this speaks to the deeply relational aspect of filmmaking between the ethnographer and their subjects – a relationality which must be predicated upon ongoing engagement and accountability. This mode of engagement is useful for resisting the historically colonial and voyeuristic gaze which dominated earlier ethnographic films. Ginsburg (2018, p. 48) asks a key question, which should challenge

ethnographic film in both theory and practice: "Whose story is being told, and what burden does representation bring to the act of nonfiction filmmaking and the off-screen lives of those represented?" Certain filmmakers have been grappling with this query, and have developed interesting means of navigating the ethical landscape it creates.

Filmmaker and academic Trinh T. Minh-ha is one such filmmaker, known for her 'antiethnography,' an approach to ethnographic filmmaking which rejects traditional ethnographic constructions of the 'Other' by blending documentary filmmaking traditions with fictionalised elements. Trinh works with her subjects to devise fictional scenes which are drawn from real lived experiences. In this way, Trinh acknowledges that there is often an arbitrary distinction between what is considered 'fact' and what is considered 'fiction.' This is a particularly clever way of subverting the colonial legacy of ethnography, which as Trinh argues, often constructed fictions about the 'Other' which were presented as facts. Trinh's process of filmmaking is deeply collaborative – the subjects in her films are encouraged to devise their own narratives based around their lived experiences. By giving this power of narration *back* to the subjects, Trinh and her collaborators create a paradigm guided by ethical ethnographic representation.

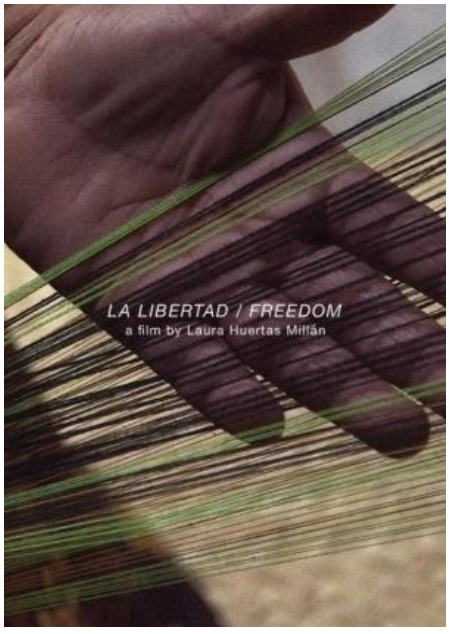

Figure 3 – Poster for *La Libertad (2017)*

Trinh argues that when constructing an image of their subjects, it is the job of the ethnographer "not to speak about but rather to speak *nearby*" (in Chen 1992, p. 87, italics added). This notion of 'speaking nearby' continues to hold weight – it shows contemporary ethnographic filmmakers how to engage with their subjects in a way that is not detached, voyeuristic or without integrity. Rather, it is an ethos which allows the ethnographer to

consciously *and* conscientiously practice collaborative ethnographic filmmaking which resists the urge to speak about or speak for subjects. In this way, 'speaking nearby' transforms from theory into praxis.

Art and resistance: The work of Laura Huertás-Millan

Another creative equally influenced by and interested in the idea of speaking nearby is Colombian filmmaker Laura Huertas-Millán, who recently completed her PhD in ethnographic fictions (ethnofictions) with the Harvard SEL. Huertas-Millán's work is entangled with the sensory and deeply vested in giving her subjects the space to 'speak' their own truths. By playing with experimental forms, "Huertas Millàn conceives of a new way of voicing the subaltern." Ethnofictions also have a deeper history within ethnographic filmmaking – Jean Rouch was an early pioneer of the practice which he used as a vehicle to conduct what he termed 'shared anthropology' (Berthe 2018, p. 248). Similarly to Trinh, Rouch works collaboratively with his informants which allows them to devise their own modes of expression, blending nonfiction with fiction as a way of making meaning out of their day-to-day lives. It is a practice that "gives agency to its subject, using fiction to suggest the potential for other realities."

Figure 4 – Shot from *La Libertad (2017)*

Often, Huertas-Millán's work focuses on the mundane in order to explore broader themes; the violence and erasure of colonisation and the complexities of gender relations can be read in many of her films. Within all of them is a fundamental commitment to exploring themes of freedom – how it is understood, talked about and felt by her subjects. One of these is *La Libertad* (2017), filmed in

Mexico with a community of matriarchal Indigenous weavers. Huertas-Millán uses the craft as a vehicle for exploring how, in this community, art, labour and freedom work together. Throughout the film, different but complimentary shots are stitched together, reflecting the way different threads are woven to form a whole. Here, form meets content, exemplifying it. Huertas-Millán's practice combines aesthetics with anthropological inquiry, demonstrating that the boundaries of ethnographic film can continue to be pushed and tested.

Both Trinh and Huertas-Millán's practices demonstrate that meaning-making via visual modes of expression affords an agency to anthropological subjects which textual ethnography often fails to deliver. The practice employed by both these filmmakers is accessible and collaborative, and gives space for subjects to visualise themselves and their lives on their own creative terms. It also disrupts the authority of the ethnographer, meaning 'authorship' is not held by exclusively by the anthropologist. This kind of ethnography does not simply 'tell' its audience about the lives of others; it allows them to see and *feel* these worlds, too.

Where to from here?

The terrain of visual anthropology is wide and full of possibility. Despite this, the way that anthropology engages with and teaches ethnography is still largely reliant on text-based representation (the irony of my argument taking a written form is not lost on me). I am not suggesting we abandon the textual; rather, that there are certain knowledges and ways of seeing the world which cannot be accessed through text alone. Visual anthropology and particularly ethnographic film can engage the senses in innovative and valuable ways, and sensory ethnography can produce a different kind of understanding. The Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab knows this, and harnesses it to continually create experimental forms of ethnographic film, including *Leviathan* (2012) and many others. Although there is valid concern that ethnographic film cannot approximate the same kind of interpretative depth that written ethnography can, there are filmmakers who hold an awareness of how to avoid

misrepresenting the communities they work with. Both Trinh T. Minh-ha and Laura Huertas-Millán are filmmakers who resist the colonial legacy of 'Othering' their subjects by working collaboratively with them to create their own forms of representation. There is something deeply exciting about what ethnographic film has to offer which lies in the collision of the aesthetic with the sensory, and form with content.

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