

Panel: VO2 Establishing academic standards of evaluation for non-literary forms of representation in anthropology.

(short abstract: The need for proper guidelines to evaluate non-literary forms of representation in anthropology, is directly related to the need for other ways of knowing and communicating about 'the human condition', than through written text.)

Paper Title: Filmmaking for Fieldwork

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Short abstract: This paper will address the need for non-literary forms of representation in anthropology, and develop some ideas about how we may assess the quality of work that responds to such a need.

Long abstract: I am a practice-based teacher working at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, UK. I teach ethnographic documentary filmmaking practice to MA, MPhil and PhD students and to more established researchers, across the Humanities, on an intensive two-week international summer school. As a filmmaker, I make documentary films distributed by publishers of academic related films and other work by commission.

This paper will address the need for non-literary forms of representation in anthropology and develop some ideas about how we may assess the quality of work that responds to such a need. I hope to show how VA methods can open up new avenues of inquiry that may lead to a greater understanding of the experience of our subjects and thus also contribute to a theoretical anthropology. Some have argued that filmmaking is a non-academic pursuit that is best conducted outside of the University, I will contest this by examining why we use a non-literary approach and suggest ways to evaluate both student and research academic contributions to this burgeoning area of social research. Key to this argument is an evaluation of the aspects of anthropological enquiry that are well addressed by a VA approach and a look at how we teach our students to explore these subjects. I am not arguing against written anthropology but for the variety of media available to us in 2013 to be used in a fluid and symbiotic way to produce interesting, appropriate and relevant ethnography.

Paper:

In this paper I will talk about Filmmaking For Fieldwork as a research method and as a means for academic presentation. I will briefly outline my work as a filmmaker and some of the methods I have used in teaching. In doing so I hope to suggest why this approach is useful to academic anthropology and how we could move towards an appropriate means by which to evaluate this work within an academic context.

If anthropology is the pursuit of understanding relating to the conditions of human life under circumstances different from our own, then it is the interpretation of the word 'understanding' that provides the basis for my method. Information is simply the

codes, knowledge, how we apply these codes to certain tasks, understanding is our ability to experience how and why these applications work. I think a filmed approach to fieldwork is particularly good at exploring and representing understanding and this secures its unique place in social research.

My filmmaking is concerned with the ways in which human beings of all ages perform a sense of understanding in a world they barely know, and how they cope with existential uncertainties in the pursuit of wellbeing. Andrew Irving, drawing on the work of Victor Turner, comments, “The ethnographic context that is created through such performances is one in which memories, presuppositions, social roles, and statuses are continually made explicit and publicly available, thereby raising the possibility that ‘something like a drama’ might emerge ‘from the otherwise smooth surfaces of social life’ (Turner 1984: 15). I have made work about childbirth and death, adolescence, old age, adventure, identity and the fragile nature of inter-generational communication. Common in all this work is a search for dramatic contexts of expression that through some kind of audience involvement in the ‘isness’ of feeling and experience might increase our understanding of why and how people act in a world they only partially understand. The most interesting contexts are ones that demonstrate the working out of a confusing situation. Ambiguity and paradox are exciting and the tension and uncertainty they suggest provides a fertile ground for new understandings to develop in the context of our subject’s worlds. The surfaces of human life can be very confusing as understanding struggles to keep up with experience, so drama is never far away. Paradox and uncertainty are tricky problems for the rationalist for once they are conceptualized they cease to be ‘paradoxical’ or ‘uncertain’ and therefore we begin to distance ourselves from an experienced understanding of that particular reality. As the literary approach to anthropology is often driven by the need to generate rationality it can be difficult, in this context, to present the incoherent in a way that can be understood without over-rationalization or without it needing to make sense. A film has the ability to convey human experience at the boundaries of rationality through the particular ways in which this two-dimensional form creates the illusion of lived worlds with light and sound, in a way similar to that of an un-filmed lived experience. I began to see this as a particularly exciting area in which to be working academically on subjects like childbirth and death, where it is necessary to represent a sense of being *with* the uncertainty of

knowledge in process. In ethnographic work *our* knowledge arises from this primary engagement with our subjects and in filmmaking for fieldwork this is re-engaged throughout the editing process. This goes some way towards carrying the intersubjective fieldwork experience through to the finished presentation.

The issue in filmmaking for fieldwork seems to be how to employ a method and technologies that allow us to discover something new about our subjects in terms of their own experience; one that gives us the ability to extend this understanding in the editing suite, with footage that facilitates a compelling and relevant form of expression in the final presentation. Editing is always experimental, searching for a story hidden in the material and a film that emanates an experienced understanding of our subject's lived realities.

Students require a simple methodology that they can trust and understand to begin exploring the world. I try to get students into the field as soon as possible, to be in the world, act, reflect, and then express this combination of 'isness' and ideas with compelling storytelling. In making a film there are a lot of technical issues to overcome and we need the quickest route through these so we can arrive at filmmaking for fieldwork in the shortest time, 9 months at the GCVA before our masters students conduct their final projects, or *one week* on our two-week short course!

Paul Henley, with tongue firmly in cheek, has taught our students his, 'Ten Commandments of Observational Cinema' for the past 25 years. Paul's 'ten commandments' range from shunning the use of tri-pods to non-use of extra-diegetic music, all useful things to consider when attempting to represent another reality, but they culminate in the tenth commandment, which is paradoxically "No deviation from any of the above..except when necessary or appropriate". What Paul is emphasizing here is that we must be careful with our methods, in order to gather the richest and most useful material in our search for understanding and to not confound our results, but that we must also consider how to best present this to communicate well with our audience. 'Degrees of ethnographicness' based on adherence to individual aspects of method is for me less important than the proximity to the subject created by the film as a whole. It is all about finding a useful route to the drama of real lives, and the

observational approach provides a very good foundation to the search for meaning, that allows for many possibilities in the editing suite. When we begin to understand our subject then interventions in the field and trickery in the edit may make our point more clearly. But it is rare that our students have a rich understanding of their subject matter nor a mastery of film technique. Paul realized that what we can expect of students, to begin with, is competent but mostly descriptive work and he has given many people a very firm foundation on which to build experimental and successful careers. He places the emphasis on ethnographic film, seeing ethnography as the bedrock of anthropological enquiry. Paul taught us the rules and then inspired us to break them when we sensed the boundaries to our understanding. When rules are reified and used slavishly in any context then this can become a distortion of culture through the lens of a particular type of Western method. There is no more authenticity to be gained in using a camera hand-held than with a tripod. What is truly 'observational' in method is a way of seeing and not necessarily a way of doing. "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." Blake's quote reminds us to consider our subject first and to allow a style to emanate from that particular reality, the fundamental rule of the observational method. Simply by doing this we will stick to the philosophy even if we inevitably bend the rules. This is a truly academic approach to a filmed subject; it is about intellectual ability, observation *and* physical engagement. The particular combination of these created in filmmaking for fieldwork extends the academic pursuit for knowledge into the realms of understanding. It would therefore seem appropriate that in addition to finding existing criteria within academia to assess our work we also observe how this method can and should alter the boundaries of what we consider academic.

Much of my teaching is focused on getting students to commit to 'shots' and not 'hover' between two ideas neither representing one thing or the other. Similarly, when teaching interview techniques, it is about arriving at an interesting point quickly rather than illustrating the long-winded process of getting there. The F4F approach brings this need for commitment to the surface and can create an immediate sense of research agenda. Research is our aim so in the future perhaps we can push students harder in this direction and demand more than descriptive work from them. We can

assess their work on what they contribute to research areas experimentally, and how they innovatively use the technology we provide for them to develop experienced understanding. However, we must still provide the foundation of good methodological skills rooted firmly in a primary and prolonged engagement with subjects, and not exchange ambition for substance. In short, we need to establish a set of principles that can be interpreted in a variety of ways at the same time as teaching a simple, coherent method that will enable students to be bold and focused in the field. Interestingly, as technology changes, for example with solid-state recording, students are finding new methods to build 'old-fashioned' narratives. Traditional filmmaking has always involved getting to know material well through processes of logging, transcribing and paper-editing. The process of ingesting material into the edit suite no longer involves stages that can accommodate these processes so we must impose these methods on our students to ensure they understand 'properly' their material but we must also be attentive to the new, more chaotic, methods that seem obvious to them through new technological processes and their own engagement with media.

Filmmaking for Fieldwork is proving to be very popular outside of anthropology and whereas the method has been developed as an extension of western ethnography, I think it would be a mistake to limit our techniques to the boundaries of this very specific engagement with culture. Rather, we can use the method to explore academic problematics in many different disciplines. I am currently working on a filmed research project in collaboration with a political scientist (I'll give links to this at the end of this paper). It is hard to conceive of what will happen in the field, nor would you want to through fear of limiting the quality of your observation. It is important to problematize, and by doing so begin the filmed fieldwork in an interesting place. Equally, it is important, if we are considering the contribution to academic anthropology, to reflect on the findings and to locate these within an academic discussion. We must also recognize how this process works in combination between filming and writing, and understand that in a student's work the representation of this will be very different than the presentation of a hypothesis based on the reading of theory and other people's ethnography. A written fieldwork proposal and a written companion text are more than adjuncts to the film but we need to understand how these are changed by the experience of a filmed engagement and we must allow these things to come together in the final presentation. Traditionally

this has taken us a lot of time, and as most of our institutions are under threat of closure because of this, we need to think of efficient ways to teach and evaluate this.

To conclude, evaluation of VA work at undergraduate, masters and PhD level could have more emphasis on an 'analytical' research contribution rather than a solely descriptive one, but we must also recognize what it takes to produce a solid foundation for a career as a researcher using filmmaking for fieldwork. If we base our teaching on attempting to create unique filmmakers in one or two years then perhaps we forgo the opportunity to provide the foundation on which to build a more secure career over time. Students of audiovisual anthropology, at least at undergraduate and masters levels, should not be judged mainly on their theoretical grasp and I argue that in VA, theory should be used to develop method but should not be an end in itself. The particular combination of filmmaking and writing that develops through the use of non-literary forms of investigation and expression needs to be evaluated with a greater understanding of the symbiosis of art and science. I would certainly support the hypothesis made by our convener and others at an earlier IUAES congress, that anthropology is a collection of methods, scientific, artistic and philosophical grounded in the craft of ethnography with a common aim to understand 'the human condition'.

The truly great expressions of human endeavor, the Welfare State in the UK, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Human Rights Council, for example, are developed through the borrowing of ideas from philosophy and the *experience* of human tragedy. In attempting to respond to an impact agenda at the same time as exploring the uncomfortable and confusing realities of human lives in an academic way, perhaps we should be encouraging our VA students towards a method that develops experienced understanding of complex situations and consider the impact of *that* on the academic endeavor in the social sciences.

Further examples of teaching practice, filmmaking and research work
can be found at <http://www.allritesreversed.co.uk>