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Circulating ethnographic films in the digital age

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Whereas Harjant Gill's following chapter offers a solid blueprint for how to approach circulating a completed ethnographic film in established infrastructures of circulation—the documentary and ethnographic film festival circuit, for instance—this chapter troubles the very category of ethnographic film through an attention to filmic and audio-visual circulation more broadly. In what follows I focus on the kinds of genre destabilizations that result when unanticipated actors (as well as the usual suspects) produce audio-visual material that can and should be considered ethnographic and circulate this work in alternate circuits. Vannini (2015) recently argued that the sheer volume of televised popular content that could be considered ethnographic should push academic anthropologists to critically think through and learn from this content towards reimagining the genre. I extend Vannini's (2015) argument by pushing for an attention to how digital networks and infrastructures of circulation and distribution not only make visible new ethnographically rich forms, correspondences, and actors, but provide us an opportunity to interrogate the established political economy and aesthetics of ethnographic film.

I begin with a discussion regarding the importance of broadening the definition of ethnographic film to recognize a diversity of audio-visual content made possible in today's digital media ecology. If we take seriously Borgan's (2013, p. 28) suggestion that "ethnographic film production blurs with video and new forms of mechanical and electronic reproduction," then we should ask: what should be the terms of engagement for a conversation about ethnographically rich audio-visual material and their circulations? Equally important: how might we reimagine ethnographic film when we engage with cinema produced by Indigenous

and diasporic groups that are now circulated online? Ginsburg (1995) argued over two decades ago that we should embrace the parallax effect that comes with taking seriously the creative, genre-breaking, self-representational projects of those who were previously the subjects of a colonial anthropological project. How does an engagement with the astonishing variety of contemporary ethnographically rich audio-visual material produced and circulated by Indigenous and diasporic creatives rearticulate Ginsburg's (1995) call and Rouch's (2003) vision?

In the second part of this short chapter I engage with examples of a few projects that help us think through how we might reimagine what constitutes ethnographic film when take as our starting point questions of circulation and its concomitant concerns of authorship and authority. Each of these examples push us, I believe, to re-think our investments in the genre in ways that make clear the political economies at play in the circulation of differently situated audio-visual material. Ultimately, I call for a return to Weinberger's (1992) description of ethnographic film as one "without limit, a process with unlimited possibility, an artefact with unlimited variation" (p. 55) and suggest that this capacious way of thinking might more readily capture the opportunities and challenges of producing and engaging with critically engaged ethnographic audio-visual content in the digital age.

Troubling the category of ethnographic film

To discuss ethnographic film and the ethics of its distribution and circulation in the 21st century brings us back to the question of how we define ethnographic film as a genre in the first place. As Heider (2006) famously asks, what is the ethnographicness of ethnographic film? Many of the historical debates in anthropology around ethnographic film, as Basu (2008) notes, have centered on the tension between written and visual ethnographic accounts and whether or not the filmic medium, as it captures social life, is scientific enough when compared to written text. In these debates, producing ethnographicness through film is imagined as already always

linked to a logocentric, explanatory project (Spitulnik Vidali, 2016). Visual anthropologists had to justify their approaches within this framework, not only in written responses to the critiques of naïve realism that anthropologists who trafficked in the written word levelled against them (see Hastrup, 1992) but, implicitly, in the audio-visual work that they generated. Ethnographic film (and photography) either became the refutation of an epistemological orientation towards theoretical and conceptual models or an attempt to illustrate them for educational purposes (Vannini, 2015).

Debates that pit the authority of filmic ethnographies against textual ones, of course, are too many and too complex to recount here. What is important is how, historically, ethnographic film, as a category and an endeavor, was narrowed in scope as a result of these debates. For instance, Ruby (1975), in an effort to establish the scientific authority of ethnographic film, doubled down on defining ethnographic film in relation to the logocentricity of the discipline. He argued that the discipline needed to think of ethnographic films as scientific products in their own right. Moreover, he suggested that the project for anthropologists interested in making ethnographic films was to constitute a genre that had a scientifically rigorous stylistic form distinct from other non-fiction genres. While Ruby acknowledged that all films (fiction and non-fiction) had an ethnographic quality to them in so far as they described and animated social life, ethnographic films had to appear distinct and unmistakably anthropological. Moreover, he argued later in his career that for a nonfiction film to be called ethnographic it needed to have an anthropologist, at the very least, on board during production (Ruby, 1991).

Now, to be fair to Ruby (1991), his call for a distinct genre of anthropological filmmaking was not simply a reinvestment in and retreading of anthropological authority. As MacDougall (1994) explains, Ruby was invested in making ethnographic film as a vehicle to do something other than describe or analyze. MacDougall (1994), in his own exegesis on the

matter, argues that for a film to be considered anthropological it had to theorize differently. MacDougall and Ruby, each in their own way, essentially called for an anthropological cinema that offered a different way of seeing and hearing through the affective cadences of image and sound. While MacDougall (1994) was invested in an observational approach that offered a nuanced, reflexive, and careful engagement with social worlds, Ruby, especially in his later years, pushed for experimentation and risk-taking in the genre (2008) and materializing his changing interests in his long-term multimedia project *Oak Park Stories* (Ruby, 2007; also see Pink, 2009).

In important ways Ruby's (1994) push to re-think ethnographic film and its aesthetic, method, and engagement opened the door for recent discussions that highlight the potentiality of experimentation through montage (e.g. Suhr and Willerslev, 2013). It remains the case that, despite efforts and reimagining form, ethnographic film continues to be a genre that has invested itself in making films about "anthropological topics" (MacDougall, 1994), albeit with varying agendas across the social sciences. This, of course, has meant that what constitutes an ethnographic film has reified what social scientific disciplines at large—and anthropology first and foremost—have pushed against for the last 30 years or so: the notion of a bounded Other. As Vannini (2015) suggests, "for some (invariably, anthropologists), ethnographic film must always represent the ways of life of non-Western people" (p. 394, see also Crawford and Turton, 1992; Ruby, 2000).

For the purposes of this discussion, it is safe to say that if we start with a first assumption that the ethnographicness of ethnographic films is defined by and large by an outdated and politically problematic object of study and whether (or not) anthropologists have been involved in the project, then who gets imagined as an audience and how the film circulates becomes a very limited proposition. As importantly, the audio-visual format of an ethnographic *film* is defined quite specifically as well. It is a single screen engagement that has a defined run time

(feature or short) and a particular and peculiar understanding of story/narrative. I will come back to this point a bit later but, very briefly, what becomes important in this definition is that audio-visual work that does not fit into the prefigured definition of film has a hard time finding itself included in an ethnographic film festival.

Let us take film festivals as an obvious example of how these first assumptions play out. Films made by anthropologists (or, at the very least, shaped by them) would find their natural home in the dozen or so events hosted around the world that call themselves ethnographic film festivals or were founded as such. These events such as *The SVA Film Festival*, *the Margaret Meade Film Festival*, *the Jean Rouch Film Festival*, *The Taiwan Ethnographic Film Festival*, *The Royal Anthropological Film Festival*, *Ethnografilm (Paris)*, *IFEFF*, *Ethnocinea*, *GIEFF*, *SIEFF*, *Cineblend* and so on (the majority of which are located in Europe or North America). We would engage with these festivals as the sites by which to imagine and engage with the genre. Ethnographic film as a stylistic enterprise, if we only looked at these festivals, would then reveal a particular form or aesthetic sensibility, as I imagine Ruby might have hoped for. Judges of the festival would, no doubt, screen submissions with a criterion in mind that favors observational modes of engagement. These approaches to a reflexive realist representation (Loizos, 1992), as they have evolved and cross-pollinated with various cinematic traditions over the years, are multiple and varied but share in their commitment to eschew more didactic documentary style that rely on interviews as well as more experimental, non-linear, and hybrid forms.

Ethnographic film festivals, in this sense, re-authorize anthropologist filmmakers as a particular kind of cultural storyteller—potentially re-inscribing ethnographic film and anthropology as a project that continues to reproduce a colonial gaze that is, undoubtedly, committed to memetically depicting “the real” of elsewhere and the ontology of otherwise. One simply has to look at the 2019 films included in the RAI Film Festival, where I had the honor

of being a festival judge, to see what gets included as part of an anthropological/ethnographic film festival and what sorts of disruptions of a normalized program become possible.¹ In this festival year, for instance, organizers took pains to make sure that the work of Senegalese anthropologist and filmmaker Safi Faye was highlighted, pushing for a de-canonizing approach to ethnographic film and whom could be included in its canon. The move to highlight Safi Faye's work was, perhaps, in response to the previous RAI Film Festivals tone deaf celebration of Jean Rouch during the 2017 festival—when they assembled a panel of four white male anthropologists to discuss and celebrate the oeuvre of Rouch's filmic contributions (see Santos, 2017). While this move to celebrate Safi Faye's work is important and timely, it is also telling that her body of work is recoverable precisely because she can be seen as an anthropologist who engages with ethnologically relevant topics utilizing a recognizable observational approach.

Of course, these days anthropologists who make films do not just have the ethnographic film festival circuit as their primary means to circulate their films. Indeed, there are now hundreds of festivals across the world that accept documentary and experimental work. There are also dedicated documentary film festivals as well as festivals that focus on a specific theme or with a particular notion of community. The efflorescence of non-fiction film festivals or film festivals that have included a category for non-fiction film suggests that the marginal position that non-fiction film has historically held is no longer the case. As Renov (2004) argues, non-fiction or what Greirson coined documentary, has found new popularity, in no small part to a sustained interest in reality TV (Renov, 2004) and the popularity of user-generated content on YouTube (Trinh Minh Ha, 2016).

Documentary cinema, of course, has had its own share of debates around legitimacy and authority. Without falling into the rabbit hole of these debates, the take away for this chapter is that documentary opens up other avenues to think about the circulation of ethnographically rich content and offers up sites for ethnographic filmmakers to re-think their

commitments and assumptions around filmmaking. Anthropologists and other social scientists who make non-fiction films can and should engage with these spaces to re-think what their commitments to subject and aesthetic might be.

For social scientists choosing to submit films to documentary film festivals and investing in a very different history and community of practice, it becomes possible to potentially distance oneself from disciplinary and even sub-disciplinary centers. This has implications for one's career trajectory. As a junior scholar I am all too aware of the ways in which blurring disciplinary boundaries can be fraught when it comes to tenure (in the US) or promotion (in the UK). There has been a decades long push to attempt to legitimate film in the discipline as a scholarly output and, while this push has yielded ground, it is safe to say the legibility that comes from showing one's film in an established ethnographic film festival and distributing one's film with a recognized ethnographic film outfit goes a long way to legitimating it as an output. However, circulating the very same film in documentary spaces might not have the same, dare I say, significance or impact when it comes to tenure or promotion. Moreover, engaging with and producing work alongside documentary filmmakers who work with very different funding sources and streams and a different production ethos (e.g. a production crew versus the lone ethnographic filmmaker) opens up another set of economic and aesthetic challenges. Despite this, I think that these challenges are productive insofar as they help us reframe (to echo Basu, 2008) what we are doing as ethnographic filmmakers in the first place.

Beyond the festivals, of course, are the distribution networks that bring experimental and documentary films to small, independent theaters in global cities like London. Engaging with these films, whether considered non-fiction, documentary, or experimental, potentially opens up a whole new way of thinking about ethnographic film. Take, for instance, anthropologist/filmmaker Marrero-Guillamón's (2018) reflections on Apichatpong Weerasethakul's experimental films. Guillamón begins his article by describing his trip to

Prince Charles Cinema in the West End and the sensate insights he gained from watching *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall Past Lives*. He goes on to discuss how Apichatpong Weerasethakul films become a site to reimagine ethnographic film in ways that break from a simple copy aesthetic of realist representation towards a vitalism “where the world is not given in advance, but is rather a performative achievement, continuously (re)made” (2018, p. 17). Drawing on Apichatpong’s participatory and aesthetic methods, Guillamón pushes for a different sensibility around ethnographic filmmaking that goes beyond representation. Guillamón’s engagement with what ethnographic film could be vis-à-vis Apichatpong’s methods requires a willingness to engage beyond ethnographic film to reimagine it.

Gulliamon’s (2018) openness to think beyond visual anthropological traditions to destabilize and reimagine ethnographic film is seemingly not common practice. A few years back, a group of graduate students (including myself) hosted a conference at the University of Pennsylvania titled “performing the digital” in an effort to bring together academics, media makers, and activists to think about what the digital turn offered us in terms of scholarly and political opportunities. Addressing the theme of our conference, *Performing the Digital*, Grimshaw argued for anthropology’s trailblazing legacy in producing audio-visual and multimodal work, contending that the “digital age” has not been as revolutionary a moment as contemporary scholars suggest. If anything, she argued, the rest of the academy could learn from anthropology’s 100 year-long experimentation with non-textual practices to engage social life. Grimshaw’s rhetorical moves to celebrate, even champion anthropology as always already multimodal, were helpful in an interdisciplinary setting insofar as they demonstrated anthropology’s contribution to legitimizing visual scholarship. Grimshaw, however, made these assertions while sitting next to Betty Yu. Yu is an artist and activist who sits outside of the disciplinary framework that Grimshaw had cast for the audience moments earlier. Yet, Yu’s filmic and installation work, which creatively depicts Chinese sweat shop labor and working-

class displacement in 20th century New York, could be and should be considered ethnographic in its own right.²

Yu and others who may have been the subjects of past anthropological inquiry now produce and disseminate work that is ethnographic and anthropological through various channels of circulation. Yet, Grimshaw's discussion of multimodality (and visuality) within a narrow, discipline-bound framework eclipsed the methodological and historical relevance of Yu's contributions. It seemed clear, when listening to Yu, that historical change and technological innovation has radically changed who can make anthropologically-relevant and theoretically provocative work and what relationships and correspondences these audio-visual projects can point towards. Yet, as was evident in Grimshaw's response, the subdiscipline of visual anthropology has had a hard time opening itself up to these shifts and understanding itself differently through them. In part that has to do with the kinds of work the distribution networks that we have gotten used to—certainly the ethnographic film festivals we might submit our work to, as I have touched upon, but also the independent distributors that trade in ethnographic film collections legitimate as ethnographic.

For instance, take DER (Documentary Education Resources), one of the primary distributors of ethnographic film with its mission to “support and distribute ethnographic film and media which promotes a cross-cultural understanding” (DER website, March, 2019). DER distributed films are, in the tradition of 20th century visual anthropology, imagined as classroom teaching aides, or ways of engaging students around ethnological material (Vannini, 2015). As Martinez (1992) wryly notes, the sorts of films included in these distribution channels serve to teach undergraduate students about anthropology in accessible way yet, often, serve to reify already preconceived notions of alterity. It does not help, of course, that the ethnographic films that are shown most often in anthropological departments for educational purposes are films that were produced in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—for example, Robert Gardener's

Forest of Bliss (1986, DER), Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch's *The Ax Fight* (1975, DER). How would our understandings of ethnographic film change if we took Yu's work and juxtaposed it against one of the more recent filmic additions to DER's catalogue, as I do in the visual anthropology courses I teach? How might we think differently about authority, aesthetics, and form? Even more daring, how might we reimagine ethnographic film if Yu's audio-visual and installation work was catalogued and offered by DER as an example of ethnographic work?

Of course, Yu's installation and others like it travel in very different circuits than DER or ethnographic film festivals. They exist mainly in gallery spaces and on digital platforms and inhabit the category of conceptual/critical art. Anthropology has, in the last few years, begun a fruitful dialogue on how it might rethink its approaches and products and through engagements with the art world and *beyond* text (Cox, Irving, & Wright, 2016). Much of the work in this move to foreground the affinities between art and anthropology has focused on encounter, method, and relations (Sansi, 2015) rather than thinking through the political economies of circulation that underpin each world. How might an engagement with emergent and in-between genre forms in their circulations, tell us something important about ethnographic film in the 21st century? What actors or configurations of actors emerge in these spaces that challenge the authorial taken-for-granted when discussing ethnographic film? How might these projects and products, if we gave them pride of place despite their departures from the formalistic parameters of film, reshape visual anthropology and ethnographic film?

Circulation: disrupting the category of ethnographic film

The work I have chosen to engage with in this section to think through ethnographic film differently moves in alternate, although in some cases, parallel and intersecting circuits of distribution. My choices on what to engage with in this section are, admittedly, somewhat idiosyncratic and not meant to be representative of any specific trend. Rather, I chose each project as a way to illustrate the kinds of opportunities and tensions that emerge if we engage

with circulation as a way to reimagine ethnographic film. I start with Karrabing collective and their body of work.

Karrabing is a self-described cooperative based in Northern Australia who uses film to “analyze contemporary settler colonialism and, through these depictions, challenge its grip” (Lea and Povinelli, 2018, p. 37). Karrabing (an Emmiyengal word for “low tide turning”) produces its filmic output at its own pace and uses everyday digital tools to make their work (e.g. one of their films was shot in its entirety using smart phones). Their work draws from Boalian improvisational techniques and other theatrical staging traditions to fashion a method and mode of production that Lea and Povinelli (2018) call improvisational realism. Improvisational realism is a departure from reflexive realism (Loizos, 1992) insofar as it does not reproduce subject-author dichotomies but, rather takes up a participatory sensibility to storytelling. Importantly, for this discussion, the collective does not take up the usual paths of circulation to show their work (the film festival, the established distributor), instead opting for a more idiosyncratic set of sharing strategies.

Short teasers of the films are on YouTube.³ The collective shows their films in their entirety when invited to galleries, universities, museums, and sometimes even conferences to screen them. In Lea and Povinelli’s (2018) discussion of the work of Karrabing collective, they point out that when the work is screened publicly there seems to be a need during talkbacks (in particular by anthropologists because of Povinelli’s involvement and the fact she is an anthropologist), to establish the genre of Karrabing’s work as ethnographic film. Moreover, they argue that anthropologists in the audience seem to have a vested interest in locating their filmic endeavors as a natural extension of Jean Rouch’s shared anthropological tradition. Lea and Povinelli (2018) argue that their work is less about genre and classification and more about “practice and formation: what practices bring forward a formation and social and land existence that Karrabing members struggle to (re)make as true”(p. 41). In this formulation it becomes

clear that Karrabing locate their audio-visual work as political praxis. In so doing they challenge the notion that filmic circulation is an always already a project meant to accrue economic or social value for a filmmaker or even collective.

Karrabing points us to the YouTube and the gallery space as sites where important work that resists simple classification exists. They remind us that these works and their circulations are critical to help us think of ethnographic film otherwise. As Biddle and Lea (2018) point out, the emergence of “indigenous hyperreal art and new media taking shape at the forefront of settler and anti- colonial struggles, from neorealistic cinema and cultural sensorium to ficto- documentaries” not only pushes beyond tired paradigms in ethnographic film linked to the realism of ethnographic encounter or that represent the bounded cultural subject, but opens up new vistas of engagement and circulation.

In stark contrast, Gill (2019) uses a documentary film project he worked on in the early 2000s in the United States called *Mission movie* to discuss how central value accrual and capital generation shapes how (documentary) filmmakers think about circulation. Gill (2019) describes *Mission movie* as a community-based storytelling project that narrates processes of gentrification in the Mission District, San Francisco in the early 2000s. He discusses how, despite winning several awards and being featured in film festivals across the United States, the film was not picked up precisely because of the multiple claims to ownership, rights, and authority that collaboration generated. Even though the principal filmmaker in the project decided to, on the advice of her lawyers, not provide participants with copies of the film on the advice of her lawyers on the grounds that dispersing ownership of the image would dilute its commodity value, distributors were wary to take up the project.

Gill's (2019) retrospective essay highlights how capitalist distribution networks, coupled with legal notions of authority and ownership, serve to control the circulation of documentary films that aspire to reach larger audiences. As importantly, Gill (2019) discusses how

documentary filmmakers are at the mercy of these distribution chains as their livelihoods depend on them. Gill (2019) reflects on how, in his present incarnation as an academic anthropologist, there is little financial pressure to earn money from the films he produces. As Sikand (2015, p. 44) explains, “most documentary filmmakers are not affiliated with an educational institution, such that they have to rely heavily on public funding and grants. By contrast, many anthropologists are attached to an educational institution. Consequently, their main source of income is not their filmic practice, allowing them more freedom in terms of whether their film is commercially viable or not.”

Gill’s (2019) and Sikand’s (2015) reflection on the distinct position of ethnographic filmmakers, who have the university as a source of stable income, becomes quite important in any discussion of ethnographic film, circulation, and academic work. While social scientist filmmakers are not producing and circulating films with the idea of economic recompense in mind, these artefacts are often produced to be shared in ways that accrue other forms of capital. The value that we seek to produce often is tied to our positions as scholars in the academy. In the U.S. tenure and in the U.K. REF, pushes academics to think through how their various outputs will “count” as scholarly works. As Chio (2016) argues, the legibility and legitimacy of non-textual scholarship in anthropology relies on whether other anthropologists recognize the work you produce as part of the discipline. Chio (2016) points to how various new peer-reviewed multimodal platforms have emerged, in addition to existing ethnographic film festivals, that allow visual anthropologists to legitimate their works as scholarly but that there is still much work to do to structurally legitimate non-textual work in the discipline. Importantly, for this discussion at least, this need for a particular kind of circulation to foster disciplinary recognition no doubt pushes us to reify the category of ethnographic film as distinct. It also pushes us to keep sharing our work in particular venues and distributing our work with specific distributors to gain professional recognition. If we put Gill’s account of the

Mission movie and its failed circulation in conversation with Karrabing's work and its alternate circulation, it becomes evident that aspirations for a particular form of circulation either tied to economic livelihoods, disciplinary recognition, as well as an indifference or even resistance to economic instrumentality, are central to how films are narrated, classified, and, more to the point of this essay, shared.

Isuma.tv provides (yet) another example for us to think through questions of circulation. IsumaTV is “a collaborative multimedia platform for Indigenous filmmakers and media organizations. Each user can design their own space, or *channel*, to reflect their own identity, mandate and audience” (Isuma.tv). Foregoing any established distribution channel, isuma.tv shares its work freely and widely online. A broad array of publics can access some of Isuma TV's content. To access the site in its entirety one has to become a member. Isuma's work, with its focus on curating representations of everyday indigenous life across the globe, can clearly be considered ethnographic. The goals of Isuma.tv, however, are not constructed within or around anthropological notions of “salvage” but, rather, contemporary Indigenous struggles for survivance (Simpson, 2018). Audio-visual production and circulation become the means for Indigenous communities to engage with one and other and create contemporaneous figurations of indigenous lives. The implicit aesthetic and authorial strictures of ethnographic film are abandoned in favour of a multiplicity of approaches and engagements—all relying on readily-available technology.

Conclusion

An engagement with Isuma.tv, Karrabing, and even Gill's (2019) reflections on the *Mission movie* push for a reconceptualization of what constitutes the category of ethnographic film in the first place even as it pushes us to scrutinize the networks of circulation we take for granted. There are, of course, other examples we could draw from to push beyond a narrow definition of ethnographic film and towards a broader engagement with ethnographically-

engaged media. We could engage, for instance, with conceptual video art more closely, looking at the various ways artists and social scientists utilize multi-channel installation work in ways which are ethnographic (Campbell, 2011). As importantly for this chapter, we can think about whether, how, and where these practices might, if put into an active conversation with normative academic knowledge production, circulate. Indeed, a focus on circulation pushes us to rethink not only what can be included in the category of ethnographic film but who can be included and, ultimately, what the ongoing value and political economy of the category holds in the contemporary moment.

Notes

1. <https://raifilm.org.uk/programme-2019/>
2. See <http://www.bettyyu.net/displacedinsunsetpark> for examples of Yu's work.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOnDyRSc3r8>.

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