

Ethnographic Film at the Crossroads

written by Christos Varvantakis | July 29, 2021



1. Ethnographic film is blooming

Ethnographic film, however loosely defined, is blooming. While to track and map the entire production of ethnographic film appears next-to impossible, I want to offer a quick survey of this beautiful and plural thing we call 'ethnographic film'. With my wonderful colleagues at the Nordic Anthropological Film Association, we recently attempted to map the current relevant educational programmes and film festivals worldwide for the newly launched [NAFA website](#). Our chart is by no means definite; indeed, it is a work-in-progress, but as it stands, we tracked down 27 educational programmes and laboratories in visual anthropology and ethnographic film. This is an impressive number. As the vast majority of such study programmes involve the production of an ethnographic film as part of the assessment requirements (for instance as part of an MA thesis), this offers a sense of the sheer volume of production worldwide, stemming just from institutional/educational contexts.

At the same time, we need to remain conscious and critical of the geographical distribution of such study programmes. As one would imagine, most of these *are* in Europe and North America.

Another way to approach the growth in ethnographic film production is to look at ethnographic film festivals. With my colleagues at NAFA, we have also charted

ethnographic film festivals around the world, and we have found 24 active festivals – again, we don't think that this number is exhaustive.

It's even more interesting to look at the appeal such film festivals have. The festival I work at, the [Athens Ethnographic Film Festival](#), last year received about 350 submissions. The [Jean Rouch Film Festival](#), a major European event, has received the stunning number of 900 films for its last edition^[1]. The growth in submissions for the Ethnocineca film festival alone demonstrates how the field is blooming: Ethnocineca, which had 650 submissions for its [2021 edition](#), received 550 for its previous edition in 2020, and 500 in 2019; this change is an indication of both the festival's growth and outreach, as much as of how many film makers hope to have their films screened. Importantly, too, ethnographic film festivals have also seen their audiences grow significantly in the last few years. I will return to this point and the implications of festivals having gone online in 2020 and 2021 later.

Beyond a numerical appreciation of the ethnographic film bloom in recent years, I want to address the qualities of contemporary ethnographic films.

We have seen amazing films, as members of audiences, as educators, as curators.

Intimate, sincere, insightful films, which carefully and sensibly attempt to communicate the details of the human condition.

Films that amplify the voices of people that would have otherwise been lost in the noise of mainstream film and/or print and broadcast media.

Films rigorously analysing contemporary and pressing social and environmental issues, putting such issues into anthropological perspective and enriching our understanding of such phenomena.

We have seen films that matter, and films that made a difference.

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These films, when presented with care, have a great appeal to audiences that would not be thought of as typical audiences of ethnographic film. Ethnocineca is perhaps a good example of such outreach, having managed to become the major

Austrian documentary film festival over the course of 15 years. Similarly, the Athens Ethnographic Film Festival has eventually become the largest documentary film festival in Athens - an *ethnographic* film festival. These are powerful examples to illustrate the impact that ethnographic film has - or can have. Many of us have been advocating this for years: To better use the potential of film, the potential of audiovisual compositions

... to communicate anthropological knowledge far and wide,

... to put issues into perspective, local or global,

... to nourish critical thinking,

... to shed light on the unseen, and to converse with those whose voices, gestures, and practices would typically not find their way to wider audiences in ways that preserve their full humanity. And this potential is real.

2. But what happens with all these ethnographic films?

But the state of ethnographic film circulation today is not that bright - but rather grim, even. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of study programmes in visual anthropology as well as the main dissemination platforms are in Europe and in North America. This raises the issue of the dynamics of representation - *who is telling whose story?* - and more and more festival curators are engaging and confronting these issues in meaningful ways, as in the [example of the curation of the recent RAI film festival](#), or the work that is being done in Ethnocineca. But there remains a lot to be done.

So what are the actual possibilities for the distribution, the circulation, the screenings of ethnographic films? How does this blooming production that I have outlined find its audiences beyond the occasional festival? Alternatively: How does an ethnographic film find a space in which audiences can find it? Where does this unique body of knowledge end up?

Ethnographic film festivals are central platforms for the promotion and circulation of ethnographic films. The great rise in film submissions over the last years also (necessarily) translates to a corresponding alarmingly rising number of rejections, too. I mentioned earlier that, for instance, Ethnocineca received 650 films this year. Of these, 52 films were included in this year's programme. This translates to

an approximate acceptance rate of 1 in 12 films. For the [German International Ethnographic Film Festival](#), the acceptance rates between 2016 and today range from 1 in 9 to 1 in 6. Ethnofest has a similar acceptance rate of about 1 in 7 in the last few editions, while the Jean Rouch Film Festival last year accepted one in 18 films[2].

How does this blooming production that I have outlined find its audiences beyond the occasional festival?

While it is disheartening to see how many films are being left out, it's also clear that these platforms - the ethnographic film festivals - are working hard to be inclusive.

Festivals are often running at their maximum capacity, and their organisation and production involves an immense effort that can rarely be appropriately remunerated, if at all, and are better understood as a 'labour of love'. They, we, are putting great care to do the best we can for the accommodation of as many films, views and voices in our festivals; but given the actual finances and capacities, we can only do *that* much.

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Other avenues to distribute films, such as the main ethnographic film distributors, reveal other inherent limitations. For instance, the [available ethnographic film collection of the Royal Anthropological Institute](#), a major distributor, includes a total of 560 films. The catalogue of another major distributor in the field, the [Documentary Educational Resources](#), includes around 850 films. To this collection, the DER added just about 12 films each year over the last few years, and these include both new as well as remastered older films.

Such data are probably good to think with about the state of the ethnographic film circulation. While we cannot draw any definite conclusions yet, they do indicate that the available platforms for the circulation of ethnographic film are not proportional to the growing body of ethnographic film production. *Many more* ethnographic films are being produced than we have outlets for, both in terms of festival audiences and distribution. The ensuing necessary practices of inclusion and exclusion, bound as they are to the available means and resources, contribute

to creating a 'canon' – what's in, what's out, what counts and what doesn't. Like much of the neoliberal academy, this set-up has become rather competitive.

This is not the fault of festivals nor existing distributors, who put immense efforts in the screening, promotion, housing and circulation of ethnographic films. There are structural issues that make these processes competitive, but indeed: the odds are not in the film-makers' favour. Caring for the circulation of one's ethnographic film has become an individualist endeavour in an increasingly competitive landscape.

In a world largely driven by neo-liberal market logics, which values antagonism and individualism, highly competitive practices may make sense. But as anthropologists, as co-producers of knowledge, as activists, as teachers and as ethnographic filmmakers, who are given the invaluable gift of insights into people's everyday lives, as well as in possession of methodologies that foreground people's own voices and logics, their hopes and fears: how do we respond to that? Could we perhaps think of more, of other ways for sharing and distributing our films? Could we think of ways to nurture collegiality? Could we collaborate to help ethnographic films reach beyond the audiences that they usually do, or that they can afford to, *today*?

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The proposition that I put forward in this essay is that to encourage and to support the production of ethnographic films (or other audiovisual works) doesn't suffice if we cannot also find meaningful ways of making sure that these works find an audience and an afterlife – for the public, for the research communities as well as, significantly, for the represented people and *their* communities.

If we, the people who are already convinced of and have been advocating for the use of audio-visual means in ethnographic research and its dissemination, don't do that, then nobody will. Ethnographic films are carriers of valuable knowledge; they involve immense efforts of several people; they involve hope and trust; they involve people who have agreed to be filmed, who may have opened their homes and their hearts, who have had their stories told – for one reason or another. Each of these films, each of these stories is invaluable in its own right.

So what happens to these films? What should happen to that majority of ethnographic films that never end up in the institutional repositories mentioned above? How could they be made accessible instead of gathering dust in departmental shelves and external drives?

3. Beyond antagonism: Some thoughts on what could be (collectively) done.

We should continue to support the existing venues (festivals, networks, distributors) and attempt to imagine and to establish new ones, to reach new audiences. And my strong sense is that we must engage in such endeavours collectively, in facing this issue and in imaging new platforms.

Existing networks, such as the [Visual Anthropology network](#) of the European Association of Social Anthropology, or the [CAFFEE](#) (coordinating ethnographic film festivals in Europe), can play a crucial role in connecting, organising and perhaps re-thinking the ways in which ethnographic films are circulated and shared, or the ways they *could be archived*. But such networks largely rely on goodwill and the passionate work of the people who are involved, and so would require a vast amount of support - and our collective recognition of our responsibility to do what we can.

To preserve this wonderful and immensely growing body of ethnographic films in some kind of archive might be achievable, one that would include meaningful meta-data, and perhaps even the films themselves. How could we use of online platforms and new technologies towards that purpose?

Digital publishing technologies are available, and now well-tested in the light of the events of the last year, when several film festivals have had to go online. Once we get a clear look at the attendance data of ethnographic film festivals that have taken this step to become fully virtual events, we will likely discover an amazing rise in attendance and views.

For instance, the Athens ethnographic film festival, which had an average of about 2.500 views in the years 2018 and 2019, had 7.500 views when it moved online in 2020. The GIEFF between the last physical edition in 2018 and the online edition in 2020 jumped from 3.500 views to almost 13.000. This translates to an average of 226 views per film in the online edition, compared to 66 views per film in the last physical edition in 2018. Similarly, Ethnocineca, which had an

average of about 50 views per film in 2019, when it had to switch to an online programme in 2020, it achieved an impressive average of 125 views per film.

Such data indicate that there is a good potential for films that are offered and contextualised online, as for instance in a film festival environment or in an online journal that publishes films (such as the [Journal of Ethnographic Films](#)), to be actually viewed. So now may be a very appropriate moment to open up a discussion on the potential of an archive of ethnographic films - and on how this could be created across countries, across institutions and structured in ways that would make it inclusive and anti-hierarchical.

This is a complex matter, and we are bound to encounter serious subsequent issues and questions which we'll also need to face; for instance, with regards to access (open-access?), geographical and regional restrictions, attribution, costs etc. These questions come with serious implications not just regarding logistics, but also ethics.

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Infrastructures that would help document, organise, promote, and perhaps even include parts of the (growing) body of ethnographic film production into a comprehensive archive can only be collectively undertaken, if we care about how ethnographic films might find their audiences, how we will make sure that audiences could find ethnographic films, and how we could create new audiences for ethnographic films.

It is my conviction that a big part of the future of the ethnographic film depends on the collective care we will be putting into such efforts.

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[1] I do not want to claim that all of the films submitted to ethnographic film festivals *are* necessarily ethnographic films. Yet, many (or most) of them do, or could, fit in a broad definition of ethnographic film.

[2] Please note that these data are approximations, and we should be careful before drawing any definite conclusions from these.

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