# Academic filmmaking and its discontents
In between videographic criticism and visual anthropology

Maud Ceuterick *is a Senior Researcher in film and media studies at the University of Bergen, Norway, and leads the CHANSE project DIGI-SCREENS: "Identities and Democratic Values on European Digital Screens: Distribution, Reception, and Representation" (2022-25). Her research on gender and space on screen is published in her monograph* Affirmative Aesthetics and Wilful Women *(2020). https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4122-3203*
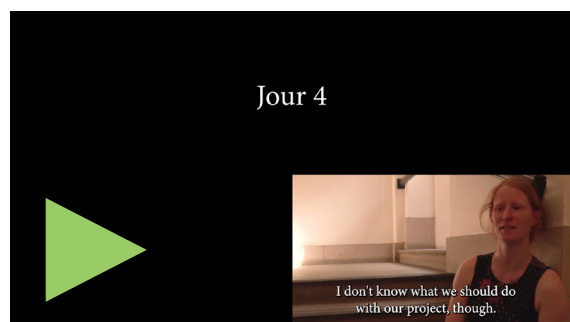
Carola Ludovica Giannotti Mura *is a PhD candidate at the University of Milan-Bicocca. She holds a MA in Social Anthropology from the University of Manchester and a post-MA diploma in Social Research Methods from Sapienza University of Rome. Her main research interests lie in the field of urban anthropology, with a focus on urban transformation, housing strategies, and spatial inequalities.*

Abstract

Working with the same filmed material from the perspective of anthropology and screen studies, the authors discuss their disciplines' different approaches to academic filmmaking. This article presents two videos, *Filming Out Loud* and *Whose Stories*, made from the same raw footage shot by the two authors together at the garage

Cedric Motors, situated close to Manchester University, UK, where they were taking a summer course in ethnographic filmmaking at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in June 2022. After spending seven days at the garage, filming the workdays of the owner Pat Rafter and his main employee (who wishes to remain unnamed), this raw material was then edited separately by each author. Producing points of methodological comparison between videographic criticism working with "an archive of moving images and sounds" (Keathley and Mittell 2019) and the culturally situated "encounters with alterity" enacted through ethnographic filmmaking (Cox et al. 2016), the authors engage with the methodological differences and commonalities between their two disciplines and filmmaking practices. By focusing on how the unpredictability of ethnographic fieldwork generated a rethinking of received conventions, interdisciplinary collaboration in visual research is here framed as an opportunity for a "transmutation of sensibilities" (Csordas 2007) bringing into question both videographic criticism's imperative of critical thinking articulated audiovisually (generally on archival material) and visual anthropology's observational legacy. Scraping at the weld between disciplinary received knowledge, the authors reflect on the positionality and ethics of their research and on the task of elaborating a filmic narrative while accounting for different social or cultural worlds.

Keywords*: Visual anthropology, videographic criticism, filmmaking ethics, performance in practice-based research, interdisciplinary collaboration

Guiding text
Working together at a summer course in ethnographic filmmaking at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at Manchester University in the hot month of June 2022, our journey together as researchers in film and media studies and visual anthropology began when, wandering around the outskirts of the city in search of a film subject, we stumbled upon a garage and became fascinated by the bodily relationship between its workers and the imposing materiality and soundscape they were immersed in. Slowly introduced to a socio-spatial landscape virtually unknown to us, a sustained shared attention initially kept our camera attached to the rhythmicity of

processes enacted and reenacted multiple times – the replacement of wheels and gears, the workings of vertical lift bridges – as well as to their visual and sonic details, thus allowing us to grapple with the potentiality of the camera in aiding our training to specific "ways of seeing" (Grasseni 2004). As we got increasingly acquainted with the material and human subjects of our research – the owner of the garage Pat Rafter and a young mechanic (who wishes to remain unnamed) who had been on duty throughout the seven days of shooting and with whom we had formed a closer relationship – questions around the authorship of representation and its methodological and ethical implications steadily gained weight in our conversations, thus enlivening dormant tensions between our respective disciplinary orientations and assumptions. These moments of sometimes heated exchange took on a new and acute significance when our main subject declined our request to sit down for a formal interview, which was a formal requirement for the course. This fieldwork upturn enabled a reflexive rearticulation of the ethical tensions between the fulfilment of an ethnographic duty towards a hypothetical audience – materialised in the effort of producing a filmic output at any cost – and that towards the people we encountered in the field, thus stimulating lively discussions about the objective of our film.

CLGM: Behind what we initially perceived as a threat to our authorship began to grow a realisation that the headwinds confronting our will to understand and portray the alterity of third "Other" were offering us some cautionary lessons on what I believe might have been the major findings of our fieldwork: that is, the possibility of an encounter between our respective "skilled visions" (Grasseni 2004) as filmmakers and what the fieldwork had to offer us. Such critical juncture brought us to sit down to a formal auto-interview in an attempt to reposition our own authorial subjectivities as also subjects of research. This crisis of authorship also made us more receptive to what Thomas Csordas (2007) has defined as "transmutation of sensibilities" – moments of ethnographic practice that allow for "intuition for a way of life" belonging to a socially and culturally diverse "Other" – and thus to the ethnographic places our fieldwork was leading us, which beautifully refused the script we wanted to impose on them.

MC: Our main divergences indeed touched upon the processes behind how to do justice to both our subject's and our own "ways of seeing" without the words of our subject appearing in the final film. We questioned the ethics of the formal manipulation of footage, pressing our subject to sit down for an interview, or the possibility of creating an auto-ethnographic product. The idea of making two different edits from the same footage arose as a way of evoking our disciplinary contents and discontents. The resulting videos account both for the difficulties we had in creating a filmic object within the tradition of visual ethnography. as the course demanded in such a short amount of time, and for the transmutation of sensibilities that happened during this time between us and our subjects of research (the young mechanic and his working environment).

CLGM: Anthropological filmmaking has widely come to be recognised as a powerful tool for evoking performative and thus transformative experiences of both the subjects present in the field and the audience of the film. As the medium of the camera allows for places of social and cultural imagination to connect within and across the field (Pink 2015), it enlarges the range of conceivable modes of living that the subjects involved in the film can articulate. While visual anthropology might still be less attuned than videographic criticism with experimenting with different genres, recent lines of inquiry in anthropology have begun to call attention to the employment of more impressionistic, performative and experimental elements in ethnographic filmmaking (Anderson 2016, Suhr and Willerslev 2012). Rather than falling back on the assumption that the implementation of techniques such as unusual framing, contrasting juxtaposition of shots, extradiegetic music and voiceover would necessarily push our visual material to the "fiction-end" of an imaginary ethnographic documentary spectrum, these approaches remind us that we should be weary of totalising tendencies within the subfield and the discipline at large.

MC: The field of videographic criticism also undergoes continual transformations in how it approaches its subjects of research and formulates new knowledge. Somewhat similar to how anthropological filmmakers approach the field from their situated position, Chloé Galibert-Laîné describes performance in the making and screening of audiovisual essays as generating bodily encounters between researchers, viewers and the subject of research, and these

encounters as producing creative knowledge (2020, 5). My use of splitscreens in *Filming Out Loud* aims to reflect this transformative experience, which you also evoke in the filmic encounter between the camera and the different bodies present. The three frames in my video aim to show how new and affective knowledge arises from the intersubjective dynamics that were at play between the three bodies present in the field of research: the garage's and its material and sonic environment, the young mechanic's, and our own researchers' bodies (entering the frame sometimes indirectly through the physical presence of the microphone). For Catherine Grant, the audiovisual essay functions as performative research which produces affective forms of knowledge and "generate[s] effects" in the viewer (2016, 256). The visual, physical and aural repetitions across the three frames aim to raise a question affectively; of whether the sharing of a common temporal and sensory experience can create a transmutation of sensibilities between the mechanic's and the filmmakers' different bodies and labour situations. And in turn transform and merge ideas of authorship and otherness.

CLGM: While substantially departing from the canon of observational documentary (Henley 2007) in its use of camerawork, non-synchronous sound and extensive use of editing, the first two minutes of *Whose Stories* still stand at the borders of conventional anthropological documentary. The general realistic overtone of the opening scenes in the video is then gradually interrupted in an attempt to unmask the contrived attempt to hide the presence of the filmmakers from the screen. The disruption generated by the noise of our microphones and subsequent introduction of our voices, rather than an explicative, omniscient voice over, are presented through a climax of disturbance – a proxy of the noise made by the attempt to establish an ethnographic and filmic authority by hiding it behind an observational script. Fiction – which is subtly present at both ends of the film through the image of the Mini car – is finally brought to an extreme through the introduction of extradiegetic music and of the two filmmakers as formal interviewees. While the first few lengthy shots of the mechanic at work are intended to generate an expansion of filmic time, the rhythm of the video is suddenly disrupted by the introduction of a quick succession of short, abruptly cut and speeded up shots that – in an almost irritating way – collide with rhythm of the extradiegetic music

introduced. Here, extreme time compression is designed to depict the anxiety of authorship generated by the filmmakers' frustration at the impossibility of hiding their presence and imposing a narrative line on the script at the same time. As this anxiety mounts up, it translates into a series of contrived attempts at rewriting the film's presumed vocation. Yet, it is exactly reckoning with this succession of failed attempts that allows the film to overcome its own climax, as the filmmakers eventually settle down to the "cathartic experience" of accepting the ethnographic richness of a failed attempt at portraying ethnographic wholeness.

MC: My main difficulty in the making of *Filming Out Loud* also emerged from the call (or obligation) to deviate from what videographic criticism usually does – critical thinking articulated audiovisually on archival material – and instead remain faithful to a living subject's ways of seeing while expressing my situated researcher's perspective as I would with any other "archive of moving images and sound" (Keathley and Mittell 2019). This duality of processes between video essay making and ethnographic filmmaking forms the main topic of my audiovisual essay. The methodical organisation of the footage by day of filming – in the style of an auto-ethnographic diary – aims to document the processes (and difficulties) of taking an anthropological approach to filming a work setting. In a first iteration, the video-essay followed a strict algorithmic method (O'Leary 2019; 2021), working through cuts and superimpositions with the entirety of the filmed material. The repetitiveness of the visual and aural soundscape this task generated placed emphasis on the repetitive acts of labour and (re-)created an immersive sensory ambiance, which is precisely what attracted us when we first stumbled upon the garage. The division in days of filming and in three frames therefore results from a process of material thinking to "tell the story of a video essay from beginning to end, to try to re-create its creation" (in the words of Grant 2019). Grant explains that this may happen through looking into the "images of the void, the pause, and the interval" (2019, borrowing the words of Carlos Losilla). Similarly, our project does not attempt to show the socio-cultural world of a subject of research, but rather tell the story of work processes and of the pauses and intervals between the mechanic and the filmmakers.

CLGM: Practical interdisciplinary collaboration can be of the highest service to help complicate the fracture lines between ethnographic documentary and other genres of academic filmmaking. I have edited our raw footage for this issue of *Academic Quarter* in the hope it could serve as a window into a transformative experience that, besides carving a new space for interdisciplinary openness, has offered the material ground for rewriting the script of what I had since then considered to be the anthropological value of academic filmmaking. In order to portray these tensions, the structure of *Whose Stories* thus intends to depict two distinct narrative trajectories, one attempted and one inevitable.

References

Anderson, Kevin Taylor. 2016. "Toward an Anarchy of Imagery: Questioning the Categorization of Films as 'Ethnographic'." *Journal of Film and Video* 55 (2): 73–87. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20688415

Cox Rupert, Andrew Irving, and Christopher Wright. 2016. *Beyond text? Critical practices and sensory anthropology.* Manchester University Press. https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719085055.001.0001

Csordas, Thomas. 2007. "Transmutation of Sensibilities: Empathy, Intuition, Revelation." In *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the Blurred Borders Between Ethnography and Life,* edited by Athena McLean and Annette Leibing, 106-116. Blackwell Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470692455.ch4

Galibert-Laîné, Chloé. 2020. "What Scholarly Video Essays Feel Like." *The Cine-Files* 15 (fall 2020). https://www.thecine-files.com/what-scholarly-video-essays-feel-like/

Grant, Catherine. 2016. "The audiovisual essay as performative research". *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 5 (2): 255–265. https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3370.

Grant, Catherine. 2019. "Dissolves of Passion." *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, edited by Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant. Accessed 6 Sep. 2023. http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/dissolves-of-passion-1?path=contents

Grasseni, Cristina. 2004. "Video and ethnographic knowledge: Skilled vision in the practice of breeding." In *Working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, edited by Sarah Pink, Laszlo Kurti and Ana Isabel Alfosno, 12-27. Routledge.

Henley, Paul. 2007. "Putting film to work: observational cinema as practical ethnography". In *Working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, edited by Sarah Pink, Laszlo Kurti, and Ana Isabel Alfosno, 101-117. Routledge.

Keathley, Christian and Jason Mittell. 2019. "Scholarship in Sound & Image: A Pedagogical Essay." In *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, edited by Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant. Accessed 6 Sep. 2023. http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/scholarship-in-sound--image?path=contents

O'Leary, Alan, 2019. "No Voiding Time: A Deformative Videoessay." *16:9 filmtidsskrift.* http://www.16-9.dk/2019/09/no-voiding-time/#

O'Leary, Alan. 2021. "Workshop of Potential Scholarship: Manifesto for a parametric videographic criticism." *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies.* 10 (1): 75–98. https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16269

Pink, Sarah. 2015. "Principles for Sensory Ethnography." In *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, edited by Sarah Pink, 26–50. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/978144624938

Suhr, Christian, and Rane Willerslev. 2012. "Can Film Show the Invisible?: The Work of Montage in Ethnographic Filmmaking." *Current Anthropology.* 53(3): 282–301. https://doi.org/10.1086/664920