

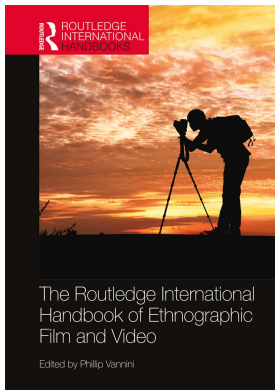
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### Theorizing in/of ethnographic film

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### 3

# THEORIZING IN/OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

*Jenny Chio*

This chapter is motivated by a series of overly ambitious questions regarding the state of ethnographic film in contemporary anthropology and cognate disciplines. Namely, what are the methodological, epistemological, and conceptual relationships between ethnographic filmmaking and ethnographic theorymaking today? How can ethnographic film help produce, or at least help inform, better ethnography, and vice versa? And, perhaps most importantly, how can ethnographers, filmmakers, and ethnographic filmmakers go about actually *doing better* at whatever it is that they seek to do (producing social scientific knowledge, film, or some combination thereof)?

To build a line of thought and argument between and across these questions, what follows is a necessarily selective yet wide-ranging discussion of recent theorizing in/of ethnographic film. It is punctuated with examples of experiments in ethnographic film- and media-making by filmmaker-artists who are anthropologically trained and/or ethnographically inclined to varying degrees. I open with the relatively familiar debates over the past 40 years on thick or thin description in ethnography, from Geertz (1973) to Taylor (1996) to Jackson (2013), and their relevance (or not) for filmmaking. This is followed by a critical overview of the more conventional, or at least more frequently discussed in anthropological conversations on filmmaking, genres of observational cinema and sensory ethnography. I then turn to works by four filmmaker-artists—Maurizio Boriello, Jennifer Deger, Ben Russell, and Alisi Telegut—as examples that, in diverse ways, offer productive challenges to the “observational-sensory” convention of ethnographic filmmaking and ethnographic film theory dominating anthropological discourse at the moment. Looking at filmmaking practices beyond anthropology allows for a much broader perspective on the experimental possibilities of ethnography and film that have been tested and explored by filmmaker-artists. I conclude by exploring both the formal and theoretical possibilities for ethnographic filmmaking that take up the challenges posed by ethnographic theory and that can contribute to expanding, though by no means abandoning, the “observational-sensory” mode of ethnographic filmmaking.

My aim is not to merely describe, and in so doing implicitly reaffirm, the conventions of observational and sensory ethnography in ethnographic filmmaking, yet nor do I wish to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Rather, underlying this chapter is a desire to examine, critique, and re-envision the ethnographic potential of film and the filmic potential of ethnography through an exploration of the conventions *and* commitments of ethnographic filmmaking practice and theory in the first few decades of the twenty-first century.

### Thick or thin

The question of the ethnography's *heft* and the ostensible benefits of descriptive *girth* for social analysis and anthropological knowledge production have remained a source of debate and discontent more than 40 years after the publication of Clifford Geertz's (1973) seminal essay "Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture." Indeed, exactly 40 years after Geertz, John L. Jackson, Jr. (2013) directly took up the question of ethnographic thick-or-thinness and what he dubs an "overconfidence" in anthropology regarding the analytical *weight* of thick description. In his ethnography of African Hebrew Israelites, Jackson points out that in contemporary ethnographic research, an ethnographer's purported research "subjects" may also be simultaneously engaged in researching themselves. Moreover, they may be "using some of the very same methods and means that anthropologists employ" (p. 13), including filmmaking and digital recordings and distribution (see also Ginsburg's important analysis of the "parallax effect" of Aboriginal media on ethnographic film, 1995). Nevertheless, there is, he writes, "an arrogance borne of the powers that 'thick description' (one of its most famously borrowed terms) is believed to grant adherents" (p. 13). In privileging thickness as a quality only an ethnographer can achieve, *thinness* thus becomes situated as "raw and baseline empiricism, the necessary starting point for social investigation but not nearly enough all by itself" (p. 13). But thick ethnographic description can only *pretend* to see everything, Jackson argues. "Thick description can be complicit with the more unproductive occultings of anthropological research," he continues, "especially since seeing through another person's eyes *is not the same thing* as actually seeing that person" (p. 15, emphasis added).

Jackson's seemingly straightforward observation that while anthropologists may believe ethnography can "see through" surface, superficial cultural phenomena by way of "thickly" describing them but that this is not the same as actually seeing a specific phenomenon itself (or a person her/himself), speaks to a central point of contention in theorizing ethnographic film. Indeed, film and filmmaking have in many ways become figured as the thinnest straw man of ethnography *par excellence*. In Lucien Taylor's essay "Iconophobia" (1996), he traces the ways in which even purported (and well-published) supporters of visual anthropology and the project of filmmaking as part of ethnography have tended to frame and situate their arguments for film within an attempt to "linguify" it (p. 83). Film is simply too thin to withstand the weight and heft of ethnography, or so go the assumptions Taylor seeks to undermine. Of course, underlying these anxieties about what visual imagery, whether film or photography, can or cannot do is the desperate longing for (an) ethnographic film to do what (an) ethnographic essay or monograph is believed to be able to achieve (a point noted in Margaret Mead's description of anthropology as "a discipline of words," 1995). "Thick description" remains the purported gold standard. For Taylor, however, rather than demanding a medium to change, the task at hand is to change the very terms used to understand the medium, or as he writes (1996, p. 86), "what if film does not say but show? What if film does not just describe, but depict? What, then, if it offers not only 'thin descriptions' but also 'thick depictions'?"

Taking these two perspectives into consideration, Jackson's critique of the valorization of thick description in anthropology *writ large* thus extends Taylor's arguments against the logocentrism, and therefore iconophobia, of the discipline. And yet, persistent anxieties over the dangers of being too thin, and the imagined riches (of knowledge) stored in being thick, continue to bubble up, as illustrated in a 2014 multi-authored discussion on theory in visual anthropology (Hockings et al., 2014). David MacDougall, who has written at length on the relationship between words and images in film, photography, and ethnography (1998 and 2005), succinctly categorizes theory in visual anthropology in three general spheres: the ontological, the methodo-

logical, and the epistemological (in Hockings et al., 2014, p. 444). Rather than insisting upon the irreconcilable differences between these theoretical orientations, the challenge for ethnographic film (as a practice within visual anthropology) is to find ways to integrate these theoretical frameworks. But resistance to doing so remains, as evidenced in the contributions by Hockings, Tomaselli, and Williams, who each maintain a rather sharp divide between the visual as method and ethnography as theory. For example, Hockings insists that “with all the will in the world, theory cannot be applied directly to an explanation of visible cultural phenomenon. Rather theory is brought to bear on some *description* of the event” (Hockings et al., 2014, p. 440, emphasis added). Again, thick “theoretical” description is positioned as the goal, although as Carta (in Hockings et al., 2014, p. 454) notes in his commentary, “film images are both observations of the world and representations of subjective mental phenomena. As such, they give us something of what is left out of any description of the world in purely third-person terms.”

Like Jackson’s reminder that seeing through someone’s eyes is not the same as actually seeing someone, theorizing the visual in anthropology (and in the practice of filmmaking) can and should be what Carta dubs a “subversive empirical practice in which all means of knowing are legitimate” (in Hockings et al., 2014, p. 453). Moreover, in a set of rejoinder commentaries published the following year, Silverstein (in Pault, Silverstein, and Graham, 2015, p. 174) insightfully identifies the gendered dimension of much of the resistance to theorizing the visual in anthropology, as “theory” (ethnographic thick description) becomes marked as abstraction and sophistication (and the domain of the masculine), while “method” (film or other thin things) is characterized as emotive, responsive, and (merely) reflexive (and by extension, feminine).

Yet even in the midst of this tug-of-war between thick and thin, and the hand-wringing between theory and method, ethnographic film as a practice has not vanished, let alone slowed. Within anthropology two related aesthetic modes or genres of filmmaking have especially come to prevail as the dominant conventions of what “looks like” or constitutes a visual representation of ethnographic fieldwork and knowledge: observational cinema (see Olivieri, this book) and the filmic version of sensory ethnography (see Kasic, this book). Efforts to theorize both forms have raised the stakes for ethnographic filmmaking, giving much-needed *weight* to the arguments by Jackson, Taylor, and Carta discussed so far. But the wide-scale disciplinary adoption and celebration of observational cinema and sensory ethnography as *the new* “thick description” of ethnographic filmmaking have also precluded and diverted attention from more critical, experimental, and radical ways of thinking, making, and theorizing. Indeed, ethnography and the ethnographic have become arguably more and more valuable and desirable in filmmaking and art practices beyond anthropology (see, for example, Foster, 1995; Cox, Irving, and Wright, 2016; Schneider and Pasqualino, 2014). Taken together, as I explore in the following section, the conventions of the “observational-sensory” mode of ethnographic filmmaking should be considered as a foundation upon which to examine and experiment with the possibilities of film and ethnography.

### “Observational-sensory” filmmaking as convention

To consider observational cinema and sensory ethnography filmmaking as conventional, and to situate them along a continuum, or more accurately as kin-related brethren within a genealogy of ethnographic filmmaking aesthetic genres, is neither radical nor an attempt to diminish the value of either (cf. Landesman, 2015; Leimbacher, 2014; Pavsek, 2015; and Westmoreland and Luvaas, 2015). The importance of attending to observational cinema and sensory ethnography in relation to each other, and within larger debates in theorizing ethnography and film, lies in understanding the dominant conventions of ethnographic film in the twenty-first century and

the ongoing commitments of both filmmakers and ethnographers. In light of this, I illustrate in what follows how the “observational-sensory” convention now constitutes a terrain upon which new experiments, and new insights, in ethnographic filmmaking have emerged.

As a mode of documentary, observational cinema emphasizes unassuming, modest, and painstakingly detailed depictions of humanity and the everyday, in contrast to the idea of cinema as spectacle (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009, pp. 3–7; also see Olivieri, this book). For ethnographic filmmakers, this has meant carefully attending to the “texture of lived experience” rather than privileging “the more muscular or herculean endeavors of theory, Marxism, or interpretation” (pp. 7–8). Tying observational cinema more directly to ethnographic research, Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) make an important intervention in conceptualizing *the act of observation*, which itself is fundamental to the commonplace understanding of ethnographic fieldwork as “participant-observation.” Observation, they note, is both a skilled practice, or in other words “an active and disciplined engagement with the world” (p. 11), and it can be deployed as an *observational sensibility* (p. 5).

An observational sensibility is rooted, fundamentally, in the relationship between the observer and the observed, and as such, observational cinema is also, they write, “a reflexive praxis, a way of *doing* anthropology that has the potential to creatively fuse the object and medium of inquiry” (p. 136). Jackson’s argument for thin ethnography thus echoes Grimshaw and Ravetz here, and like Carta’s argument for film as a “subversive empirical practice,” Grimshaw and Ravetz stress “the radical nature of the observational project for anthropology” precisely because attention to the theoretical implications of observation reveals and reshapes disciplinary understandings of power and forms of speaking and knowing (pp. 161–162). In turn, they propose that observational cinema be considered an example of phenomenological anthropology, with a focus on lived experience and “the irreducibility of subjects in the world” (pp. 136, 161–162). Aesthetic and stylistic modes developed in observational cinema, such as the long take and an eschewal of interviews or voice-over narration, thus come to embody a particular relationship between the filmmaker and both the profilmic world as well as the film audience, each of whom is asked and expected to engage with the humanity of the other.

As observational cinema became a dominant mode of ethnographic filmmaking, the filmic genre of sensory ethnography was institutionalized through the establishment of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University under the direction of Lucien Castaing-Taylor (see Kasic, this book). Like observational cinema, the connection between SEL and phenomenology (and phenomenological anthropology) is clear, not only in Castaing-Taylor’s earlier arguments on iconophobia and the need for “thick depiction,” but also in the very construction of the brand-name. As Irina Leimbacher writes (2014),

The choice of SEL’s name falls within the lineage of a current in written anthropological scholarship that emerged in the late Eighties and Nineties. These methodological approaches as defined by different anthropologists—Paul Stoller’s ‘sensuous scholarship,’ Michael Jackson’s ‘radical empiricism,’ and Robert Desjarlais’s “knowing through the body”—each insist on the crucial role of the body and the senses, the visceral and the palpable, in any engagement with and representation of the world (n.p.).

In many ways, observational cinema and sensory ethnography share a set of commitments to a particular mode of engagement with the world that privileges phenomena as seen by and through the camera. The similarities between observational cinema and sensory ethnography filmmaking are both aesthetic and theoretical—extended long takes, avoidance of voice-over or interviews, and the primacy of painstaking detail on the film subject—and both, as derivations

of an observational documentary tradition, as Suhr and Willerslev have argued (2012, p. 285), are “preoccupied” with a Bazinian “cinema of duration.” Nevertheless, the question remains of whether or not the long take really resembles ordinary vision or rather an egocentric, and “over-confident” (to use Jackson’s term), ethnographic filmmaking perspective (Suhr and Willerslev, 2012, p. 287). For Suhr and Willerslev, “this [critique] is not to suggest that observational cinema never considers the otherness of others, but that it does so in terms of a subject-centered perspectives, which only allows for an otherness that the filmmaker and audience are already prepared for” (2012, p. 292). They argue for greater attention to, and use of, montage to draw attention to the invisibilities of the human visual experience, to make visible the simple fact that what is seen through the camera is never a direct (re)presentation of what is seen.

In this regard, there are two differences between observational cinema and sensory ethnographic filmmaking worth noting. As the latter became conventionalized by films emerging from SEL, and particularly the films co-directed by Castaing-Taylor (namely *Sweetgrass* (2009) with Ilisa Barbash, and *Leviathan* (2013) with Véréna Paravel), the first distinction of note is that “sensory ethnography” extends the humanity of observational cinema to consider non-human lives and lived experiences as the “observed other.” The second difference has been greater attention to auditory experience, which still relies on ambient and sync sound but is layered and edited to create greater tension between the images and sound, and distance and closeness. MacDonald, in his 2013 chapter on Castaing-Taylor and sensory ethnography, analyzes the work of Castaing-Taylor in terms of grappling with the problem that *too much* was expected of cinema, an anxiety exemplified in the thick-or-thin debates and the search for theory in visual anthropology discussed earlier. And so while *Sweetgrass* was shot in a classic observational documentary manner, MacDonald writes, its commitment to sound and to the long take constructs, or at the very least is suggestive of, a lateral/horizontal relationship between subjects (the sheep, their caretakers, the filmmaker, and the audience; see also Castaing-Taylor, 2016).

*Leviathan* arguably cemented “SEL” as both a recognized name with a recognizable aesthetic. But Pavsek, Landesman, and other contributors to a 2015 special journal issue devoted to the film tempered the celebratory reception of the film by calling into question how and if “sensory ethnography” is enough, cinematically and ethically, to address the anxieties of the past particularly in relation to ethnography and its commitments. Landesman (2015) states unequivocally that “one should think about *Leviathan* not necessarily through a discourse of rupture that accounts for its total newness, but rather in terms of the continuities that it forms with the observational approach that has long dominated ethnographic filmmaking practices” (p. 17). Doing so, Landesman continues, allows for “developing new ways for participation and experimentation in ethnographic encounters in film” (p. 18). In other words, by understanding *Leviathan* within a broader context of ethnographic film aesthetics and theory, the possibilities of observation, filmmaking, and ethnography become more apparent and more vibrant. These potentialities are rooted in a shared emphasis on lived experience, an attentiveness to detail, and the ethics of the encounter which have informed ethnographic experimentation widely, well beyond what has been conventionalized as observational cinema or sensory ethnography filmmaking (see also Cox, Irving, and Wright, 2016).

#### Four experiments

If, as argued, “observational-sensory” filmmaking constitutes the current dominant convention in ethnographic film, what other forms, genres, modes, and aesthetics might help expand the practice and its theorization? The four works and filmmakers described below each occupy a different position, or relation, to ethnography and film. I highlight these particular works and

filmmakers out of a sense of pragmatism, to a large degree, in that the films I discuss are available online (Boriello, Russell, and Telegut) or as an extended feature of an edited book (Deger, 2016), so that readers of this handbook can access and analyze each for themselves. Two of the filmmakers, Jennifer Deger and Maurizio Boriello, hold doctorates in anthropology and have worked, in varying capacities, within academic anthropology as teachers and researchers. The other two, Ben Russell and Alisi Telegut, are artist-filmmakers whose works have been described as “psychedelic ethnography” (Russell) and as contributions to “ethnocultural” research (Telegut). In this way, these four filmmakers and the works discussed below, offer a dynamic, yet inter-connected, perspective on emergent forms and aesthetics of ethnographic filmmaking.

Jennifer Deger’s short video, *Christmas with Wawa* (2016), is accompanied by an essay detailing how the work was “an attempt to make a film with Yolgnu aesthetics, rather than a documentary about them” (p. 164). As a filmmaker-artist-anthropologist with deep ties to Yolgnu community in northern Australia, Deger is perhaps most well known for her collaborative experimental media projects through the collective Miyarrka Media, which she co-founded, as well as her written ethnography of Yolgnu media-making and aesthetics (2006). As the sole director of *Christmas with Wawa*, however, this video departs from Deger’s collaborative mode of experimental filmmaking. Critically challenging her own positionality as director, ethnographer, friend, and collaborator, she writes, “As I film and edit, I assume the position as both a feelingful and a knowing subject claiming and affirming my relationships through aesthetic elaboration” (p. 167). The worry remains, however, of turning to the aesthetic at the expense of the political and the ethical—concerns raised directly by Pavsek (2015) in his critique of *Leviathan*—and the video itself moves between still photographs, gently pulsing holiday lights, shining tinsel, and everyday acts of decoration and family life, refusing an obvious “subject,” narrative coherence, or visual focus. The only constant is the soundtrack: Mariah Carey’s holiday hit, *All I want for Christmas is you*. In her essay, Deger describes her video as a form of “participant imagining,” made possible by the giving as well as receiving within *all* filmmaking practices (even those that claim to be experimental), and keeping central the relations of power enacted by recording and viewing technologies (p. 168). What makes *Christmas with Wawa* new and remarkable, in light of “observational-sensory” conventions, is the way in which Deger’s critical self-reflexivity about the film leads to an experimental work that is able to foreground a filmic understanding, an elaboration, of Yolgnu aesthetics and Yolgnu Christmas that neither relies entirely upon her “standing in” for the viewer (to “explain” what is shown) nor defaults into a total aesthetic experience that avoids or overlooks cultural context and specificity.

*Faber navalis* (2016), by maritime anthropologist-filmmaker and boatbuilder Maurizio Boriello, makes its ostensible subject clear from the start: the restoration of a wooden ship. The editing and audio-visual aesthetic of the film are, in many ways, quite similar to “sensory ethnography” films, with extensive use of ambient sound, virtually no spoken dialogue, and some relatively long takes used to depict the real-time work of Boriello himself, who is the sole person in the film restoring the ship. In this regard, *Faber navalis* directly engages with the sensory world through the filmmaker himself, rather than through the camera or other technology as proxy for the filmmaker (and viewer). By watching Boriello literally at work, the distance between the subject of ship restoration and the subjective experience of restoring a ship is lessened (though not entirely closed or collapsed). The difficulty, of course, is in making a film about oneself and one’s work without it becoming an exercise in filmic narcissism, and *Faber navalis* is for the most part able to avoid the latter by granting greater audio-visual space to the sheer scale and enormity of the ship, the restoration site, and the equipment used. In the film’s description, Boriello makes clear his interest in craft and his realization of methodological “blindness” as a maritime anthropologist, or in other words, the fact that understanding how

knowledge of ships, sailing, and maritime cultures must lie not only in an ethnographic description of the context, but also in the practical, the hand-made, and the physical effort of building, sailing, and repairing ships (2016). This is a film of a particular “taskscape” (Ingold, 1993), and an innovation on Karl Heider’s (2006) call for ethnographic films to record “whole bodies, whole interactions, and whole people in whole acts” (p. 114).

Outside the discipline of anthropology, ethnography and the ethics of the ethnographic encounter and ethnographic knowledge are tested, challenged, and reworked by artist-filmmakers such as Ben Russell, who describes his filmmaking as “psychedelic ethnography” (2017). According to the description of a talk given by Russell in 2017, psychedelia and ethnography are two poles connected by the same objective: to understand ourselves in the world. Russell’s first feature-length film, *Let each one go where they may* (2009), presents an experimental echo of Rouchian ethn-fiction in 13 tracking long takes of two brothers traveling across Suriname, forming what one critic has described as a “cartographic portrayal of contemporary Saramaccan culture ... that partakes in and dismantles traditional ethnography, inviting anachronism and myth-making to participate in the film’s daring conflation of history” (quoted on <https://vimeo.com/39846969>). Typically, many of Russell’s films address classic “anthropological” subjects, from cargo cults to colonialism, religion and rituals, to global mining and capitalism. Aesthetically and stylistically, the long take characterizes much of Russell’s filmmaking. As a formal device, the long take certainly is not exclusive to any one particular genre of filmmaking, and yet it sutures work like Russell’s to discussions of “observational-sensory” ethnographic film. The short film *River Rites* (2011) provides a marked example of how Russell’s work refracts observational-sensory ethnographic conventions. The 11-minute film is comprised of a single long take of children, men, and women swimming, washing, and jumping in the Upper Suriname River, played backward with ambient sound punctuated with tracks by a noise rock band. Russell’s work ought to prompt discussions amongst anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers that consider more seriously how other ways of filmmaking have taken up and theorized the very conventions and aesthetics considered to be “ethnographic.” Whereas ethnographic films may have tried to make sense of psychedelic experiences (Jean Rouch’s still incomparable *Les Maitres Fous* (1955) being paramount in this regard), Russell’s films raise necessary questions about the unknowable but felt experiences that ethnography attempts to capture. However, Russell does so by breaking apart, if not breaking down, the expectations of ethnography while maintaining a commitment to a visual patience and attention to human subjects in context. In turn, his oeuvre expands the conventions of “observational-sensory” ethnographic film to demand that we look behind the curtain, as it were, of what ethnography claims to seek and to reveal.

The final filmmaker whose work presses against the limits and possibilities of ethnography and filmmaking is Alisi Telegut, a visual artist, animator, and filmmaker based in Montréal. Telegut’s richly colored animations often draw upon Mongolian stories, myths, and histories told to her by her relatives which are brought to movement and textured life in her meticulously hand-painted films such as *TENGRI* (2012), *Tears of Inge* (2013), and *Nutag-Homeland* (2016). Like Russell, the subjects and topics of Telegut’s work speak to anthropological concerns and themes, but in form, style, and aesthetic, the dense painted layers of her animations depict and, I would argue, demand an entirely different approach to theorizing the ethnographic in film. First, and most obviously, is the question of duration. Unlike the technology of cameras, whether film or digital, moving or still, each frame of Telegut’s animations are hand-drawn, requiring extensive engagement from both the artist and the viewer with the image as well as the way in which each frame is set into narrative motion in relation to the previous and the next one. The long take simply does not exist in this work, but this deviation from the “observation-sensory”



convention does not detract but indeed amplifies the ethnographic depth of Telegut's films by directing attention toward the imagined, yet empirically invisible, dimensions of human experience. The "thickness" of Telegut's films is visibly apparent in the textures and edges of every painted mark making up a single image that quite literally resonates and radiates when animated. Rather than looking *at* an unfolding event or even looking *for* some sort of cultural meaning captured in visible form, viewers must look at the image itself, as image, and in so doing think through what constitutes thickness, the vibrations of the colors, and the unfolding stories told through music and visual movement. The limits of animation thus push beyond defining ethnographic film as holding onto some sort of camera-enabled fidelity to "lived experience" and toward an ethnographic perspective that is capable of and prepared to engage in acts of creation and construction, much like Deger's call for "participant imagining."

The films and filmmakers discussed here clearly have very different, even divergent, stakes in the "ethnographic." Without wanting to force comparisons, let alone reduce the work of one filmmaker to the arbitrary standards set by others, I believe it is nonetheless imperative for the work of *theorizing* ethnographic film to take stock of how and in what ways ethnography is taken up, redefined, and reimagined. Ramey (2011) reminds us that despite a relatively long and known history of filmmakers working between and betwixt the ethnographic and the experimental (i.e., Maya Deren, Chick Strand, Tracy Moffatt, and Trinh T. Minh-ha), the dialogue between these two worlds has largely, with some exceptions, been one-sided, with experimental programming more frequently including ethnographic films than the other way around (see also Ginsburg, 2018a and 2018b on Moffatt and other filmmakers whose works make important interventions in visual anthropology and "sensory ethnography" more specifically). Ramey writes, "no matter how you slice it, in order for a film or video or hypermedia or any means currently employed or as yet undiscovered to transmit anthropological information visually and aurally, that information must be in dialogue with the academic *discipline* of anthropology" (p. 275). For Deger and Boriello, their position as anthropologists *and* filmmakers have afforded certain attention to their work from the discipline. However, while Telegut's animated films have been included in anthropological film festivals, hers are, arguably, the exception that proves the rule: namely, that the conventions of "observational-sensory" film continue to dominate discussions of ethnographic filmmaking and theorizing at the expense of other possibilities. To combat this reductionist tendency within the discipline, work by filmmakers like Deger, Boriello, Russell, and Telegut should be considered alongside one another and brought into dialogue with anthropology.

### **In conclusion/Inconclusive**

Theorizing ethnographic film should result in boundary pushing, not boundary maintenance. The conventions of ethnographic film, currently encapsulated within what I have dubbed an "observational-sensory" mode of filmmaking, provide a useful, albeit incomplete, foundation upon which to build our understandings of the relationships between sound and image, as well as lived experience and the representations of lives. Moreover, the generally shared commitments of ethnographic filmmaking—to ethical relationships, to challenging power, and to expanding processes of knowledge production—have been embedded within the very aesthetics and rationalizations that inform observational and sensory approaches, but as this chapter has aimed to show, neither these conventions nor these commitments are final or absolute. Just as the concept of "thick description" has been questioned, so too is it necessary to consider what other forms of ethnographic filmmaking might reveal and produce. Thus, the new experiments and approaches to ethnographic filmmaking discussed here indicate directions still to be explored.

What might ethnography look like, when the filmmaker is actively, openly, and self-reflexively “testing aesthetics,” as Deger’s short video attempts? How can skilled “doing” reshape the representation of knowledge transmission, as in Boriello’s ship restoration? When is the long take *more than* a representation of real time phenomenon and something that instead enters into a space of contemplative socio-political refraction (Russell)? And how might other forms of participant imagining, such as hand-drawn images and animation, speak more fully to the humanity of culturally specific conditions (Telegut)?

To return to the motivations that first underpinned this essay, the question of how to *do* better ethnography and what role ethnographic filmmaking might have in this endeavor is an admittedly impossible question to answer conclusively. Nevertheless, by expanding the conventions of ethnographic film and by experimenting with not only the formal but the theoretical implications of filmmaking, it becomes possible to re-envision our ethnographic commitments and put into practice different, and diverse, modes of (re)presenting the lived experiences of ourselves and of others.

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