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Anna Lisa Ramella



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De-hierarchization, trans-linearity and intersubjective participation in ethnographic research through interactive media representations: www.laviedurail.net

Anna Lisa Ramella

The project LA VIE DU RAIL on which this article is based is the result of various collaborations, for which I would like to express my appreciation: Zentralnorden Kreativgesellschaft mbH (Niels Grugel, Alex Kohler, Max Schrader and Kim Köster) for developing, lay-outing and realizing the website, Javier Barbero for the common experience, Christine Utterberg, Andreas Rosenthal and Jennifer K. Pro for their thorough proof-reading. Further I'd like to thank Cristina Grasseni and Florian Walter for convening the panel which underlies this article, my co-panelists at IUAES 2013 as well as Peter I. Crawford and Nadine Wanono for the discussions, and AnthroVision for offering a platform that allows the discussion and presentation of alternative formats of anthropological work.

Introduction

Interactive media and html-programming offer a variety of possibilities to organize research material. Different media forms like still and moving images as well as sound recordings can be interwoven with texts as to broaden the sensory experience and enable the interaction with visual knowledge. In this article I will argue that interactive media may favour some of the key concerns in presenting ethnographic and anthropological research material by enabling a de-hierarchized co-authorship between informants, researcher and recipients through participation in the production of a multi-perspective knowledge. My website www.laviedurail.net, which will serve as an example in this article, contains texts, videos, photos and sound recordings, which are structured along

the map of the train tracks. While the clustering of the material has been edited by the researcher, the recipients may perform more self-determined choices regarding the order in which the material is being perceived. Subjective association of the recipient may lead to diverse cross-links and incorporates an individual journey through the elements along the tracks. In the interplay with the multiple linearities within the material, a trans-linear structure in a certain sense of Tim Ingold's concept of the "meshwork" (Ingold 2009: 38) may be created. I like to call this process a "subjective path of knowledge".

While the interlocutors in the field have participated in determining the body of the material through collaborative methods, the researcher appears rather as a mapper of the elements of this experience. While they are at once a form of obtained and collected imagery, sensory media are more to be seen as a proposition rather than a result. An interaction between the voices of the informants and the recipients may thus be enabled, in which knowledge is produced through the engagement of the user and the recipient's exploration of Grasseni's "skilled vision" (Grasseni 2004: 16; 2007), or Ingold's "education of attention" (Ingold 2000; 2001). A combination of such engagements informs the individual narrative.

This process of what I would like to circumscribe with Kirby's words of "[...] embracing and learning from [...] a multiplicity of perspective" (Kirby 2009: 211) encourages de-hierarchization by reducing, or rather dividing up the authorship of narrative and thus allowing a collaborative project.

I will argue that interactive media, giving the example of an interactive website, have the potential to create a triangle of interaction between the informants' testimony, the researcher and the recipient that perceives all three as subjects and incorporates the subjectivity of each.

In this article, I will refer to my own interactive website www.laviedurail.net to show how the possibilities of an html-interface have been substantial in the process of trying to circumvent somewhat 'traditional' dilemmas of representation and hierarchization. Alongside the potential of interactive media for ethnographic research, I will also discuss the limits of this genre and the concerns that I have come to experience in my own research.

LA VIE DU RAIL - A railway line in Mali as transitory space was created for my M.A. thesis in Transcultural Studies at the University of Bremen. It retraces the Malian part of the former Dakar-Niger railway line integrating diverse forms of media. The website was published online in German in February 2012 and in English one year later.

LA VIE DU RAIL – a railway line in Mali as transitory space

The project is based on fieldwork that I conducted in Mali and Senegal in 2010. I had originally gone to West Africa to research the mobile lives of the railroaders working on the Dakar-Niger Express train that went from Dakar (Senegal) to Bamako (Mali). Since the train used to take between three and five days to get from one end of the track to the other, railroaders usually were in one place no longer than two weekends a month. The most time was spent aboard the train making this their primary 'home', while it was common not to have a house in a fixed location. My project partner Javier Barbero had been traveling in Mali in 2005 and was ready to shoot a documentary on this issue. My

key interests in the diverse forms of daily mobility and concerns of place and space were triggered enough to take my chances and travel with him to Dakar – only to find out that the Dakar-Niger Express train had ceased to run due to an accident on the tracks. While I will not go into too much detail about the content of the research, but rather about its digital form, I must point this out as to mark the path from navigating an unforeseeable fieldwork to organizing the material in an interactive website. The absence of my research object (and the quest to find my potential subjects, the railroaders) inevitably led me to completely opening up my research question. It led me to a tiring but adventurous search for a train, for answers, but first of all for the questions to even ask. In the aftermath I believe that this was my first and greatest chance to de-hierarchize my research approach, as anything that I experienced, any anecdote that was told to me and any question that I had asked was triggered by what was brought to me during this journey. During fieldwork, I had no choice of being overly selective on the topics I would address. Once Javier and I had made it all the way to Mali, we found that there was a shorter track train, the *Autorail*, which was still running on the Express tracks, but only from close to the Senegalese border (Kayes) to the Malian capital Bamako. Progressing forward through this world - entangled with the train tracks, railroaders, villages along the tracks as well as their inhabitants - I found not only the questions to ask, but also a considerable amount of diverse answers, which mainly circled around the same topic: the presence and absence of the train.

Due to the use of audiovisual research methods, I came back with fieldwork material that ranged from sound recordings, photos and film to anecdotes and reflections, in addition to diverse content such as memories of the old train, dealings with the new train, political actions concerning the privatization of the tracks, mobile relationship matters, logistics of family bonds etc. The one element that was clearly visible in all of these, though, was the train and those tracks along which it was making its way through the Sahel.

Looking for an appropriate form of arranging the material that would allow the subjects' voices and let the audio-/visual material speak, but would not undermine my subjectivity as a researcher, I came across the possibility of an html-website. This form would give me the possibility to not only combine these different media, but to also include the stories and topics that I had come across and that were all part of *LA VIE DU RAIL*. Unfortunately, the linear character of text documents and print productions does not offer much choice in terms of cross-linking, and many elements of fieldwork get crossed out for the sake of continuity, or a somewhat linear perception of logic. In *LA VIE DU RAIL*, I chose to reduce my authority in defining an order of perception, and based the structure on the one linearity I found in the field, which is the map of the train tracks themselves. As the main menu on the website, they define the structure along which various stations serve as containers for the media elements. While the tracks offer a map-like form of orientation, the decision about where to start, continue or end the journey is not predetermined.

Depending on the decisions of the recipients as well as their approach to decision-making (by interest/ by curiosity/ by prior knowledge/ by reading custom/ by visual aspects), a fieldwork setting can be re-enacted. The resulting knowledge will mostly be determined by the order in which the information conveyed is perceived, and by the senses affected by it. Sense-making will be crafted depending on the causality that this path produces. Thereby, I argue that the authority of the researcher can thus be reduced and a notion of "being there" may be conveyed (Cf. Borneman/Hammoudi 2009: 5).

LA VIE DU RAIL draws out the interaction of individuals and circumstances along this specific railway line and perceives them as participants in constant transit. I found the

permanent movement of being in transit at the same time contrasted by the stability of the people who work on the train: While they are leading a life in constant movement and travel, they communicate their affiliation to each other referring to it as “village” or even “race”; what I found special about this is that, rather than identifying with a place or local setting, here the bonding factor is a condition – the condition of movement. The lives of these railroaders as well as of the inhabitants along the railway line become the central theme of my project. It combines personal narratives and observations with the reflections on places, non-places (as in Augé 1992: 42) and transitory spaces.

Photos and sound recordings appear as situational field experiences and are not described or contextualized further. They thereby offer a notion of the audiovisual setting without directing their focus to a certain instance or interpretation. Although the frame and composition have been chosen by the researcher’s sensory focalization, the avoidance of directing the attention to a certain inherent element allows for a process of puzzling, drawing together different possible associations.

In the three parts of this article, I will focus on the use and composition of diverse media, the approach to trans-linearity through a three-dimensional web space, as well as possible forms of de-hierarchization that include the recipient’s subjectivity as a third actor into the process of producing knowledge.

I will focus on the choice of this form as a way of favouring the subjects and their stories.

Interactive media composition

Departing from the idea of an “atlas as a shorthand for non-linear narrative”, as suggested in Walter’s and Grasseni’s invitation to this issue and referring to Aby Warburg’s “Mnemosyne Atlas” (Warnke 2003), the imagery of a visual cluster is being evoked. While visual media are usually associated with an author, the notion of mapping leaves space for a ramification of potential associations that group together different individuals.

Media use in *LA VIE DU RAIL* has been subjugated to the selective choices and clustering of my authorship. In contrast to that, I aim to favour a process of self-guidance through the many possible associations evoked and linked with the media. The different elements thereby offer a variety of sensory experiences, which again facilitate choices according to one’s privileges and preferences. This is to underline the notion of an atlas in agreement with Zumbusch’s perspective on the Mnemosyne: “Warburg’s Mnemosyne, usually read as a theory of cultural memory, is primarily a theory of pictorial quotation” (Zumbusch 2010: 120). The material, audio-/visual and textual testimony, is being presented in a *quoting* manner rather than as a way of *translating*. This is to ensure the non-universalist and incomplete nature of the project, namely anything found within the project is merely a fragment within its time and space coordinate. Of course, guidance through authorship in the form of linear arguments may support a contextualizing point of view, or even provide a thought-provoking change of perspective for the recipient, beyond one’s boundaries of imagination. At the same time though, the imposition of such an indication risks taming the possibility of a subjective finding within the material. Further, it may even represent the author’s ambition of owning the interpretation of the many interconnections between the fragments found in the field.

This is not to say that the anthropologist can merely embody the role of a collector of random information, but rather that he/she should be seen as a subject just as much as the recipients and the interlocutors of the research. The associations and interpretations

that cross his/her mind in any phase of the research are just as much due to the accustomed¹ structures of perception and the subjective experiences during and already prior to the respective experience.

Multimedia formats, in this right, may serve to critically reflect on this issue, but may also provide an exemplification and reflection through the visualization of such accustomed visions - for both the researcher and the recipient.

The inclusion of the subjectivity of the researcher, however, should not be discontinuous, but rather illuminate the subjectivity of research in general. Fieldwork is always a mode of experience by a subject within what Taussig calls the “world of ‘immanence’”, which, as he argues, “escapes from the time-based cause-and-effect reality we most of the time like to think we observe” (Taussig 2004: 314).

In the conceptualization of the website, I chose to open-endedly deal with this dimension, allowing my own voice to coexist in texts and media with those of my interlocutors, and enabling a sensual experience of a sensual work.

LA VIE DU RAIL includes media like video clips, photographs, sound recordings and texts that vary from anecdotes to theoretical arguments.

The complex of such different media materials in combination with texts of diverse content and structure challenged me with the need of finding a meaningful form to hold them all together. Despite the diversity of topics within the material, the one visible bonding element in all of them was the train – as it was also the centre of my research. An interactive website seemed to be a possible map to keep hold of all of these elements and to structure them in a way that would not prioritize one element over the other, or one type of medium over another. The attempt within *LA VIE DU RAIL* does not mean a negation of hierarchical structures, but rather an exposure of the subjective aspects of giving structure and the active awareness of that. Multimedia researchers such as like Shaun Moores have explored the capability of a “doubling of place” (Moores 2012: 13f.) of communication media. *LA VIE DU RAIL* suggests such a notion by bringing more than two places into one; it enables the creative process of structuring space in a way that provides access to encounters which have happened in another place and thereby triggers the creation of a space in which a third encounter can happen.

Texts

One of my early decisions was to include a representation of the research process in the reflection of my encounters in the railroad region.

The texts embedded in the website, though written in a consistent style, cover various topics. They include theoretical reflections², personal narratives³, observations with interpretative approaches⁴, meta-reflections on fieldwork experiences⁵ etc.

As Tyler suggests in his contribution to Clifford’s and Marcus’ reader *Writing Culture* (Tyler 1986: 130f.), “[t]he whole point of ‘evoking’ rather than ‘representing’ is that it frees ethnography from *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails ‘objects,’ ‘facts,’ ‘descriptions,’ ‘inductions,’ ‘generalizations,’ ‘verification,’ ‘experiment,’ ‘truth,’ and like concepts that, except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies.”

In order not to filter my interlocutors’ narratives with my own writing, I chose an openly subjective style for the texts of *LA VIE DU RAIL*. This creates a composition of the subjects’

narratives, as shown in video and reflected through texts, without neglecting my own voice.

An introductory text upon entering the website (*Insight*) describes my approach and the way I have been introduced to the field. On the menu, this text is positioned outside the left end of the railway line. At the opposite end, again outside of the line, a concluding text (*Outlook*) is positioned. Those two points mark the only two texts for which I suggest a reading order, as they offer somewhat a meta-perspective. All other texts are positioned at the stations they are related to, within my fieldwork. Visually, they are represented with the same symbols and they are not given priority over media elements.

As mentioned above, structuring will be exerted according to the reading experience: readers of Latin alphabets, like myself, will much likely structure their journey from left to right, which reflects in the positioning of in- and out-point of the lineage. However, it was my experience in the field - starting in the very western part of the *Autorail* (*left on the map*) - that determined this very choice. I could imagine that readers of arabic or hebrew literacy may tend to start the journey at the other end, in the far east (*right*), as according to their reading customs. Anyone familiar with the Dakar-Niger railroad track knows that railroaders or inhabitants of one of the villages in the region may start their journey according to their personal position and traveling experience.

In opposition to a linear narrative, cross-links between specific topics in the various texts are not being superimposed, but may still be found while navigating. The personal focus of the recipient builds the main argument and may also be influenced by the way in which one has learned to focus in general on successive and distinct stations. Focusing on the personal stories of the railroaders, to name an example, may lead to associate their individual strategies of “building a home” with planting trees outside the depot or structuring social relations along the tracks; however, focusing on the political implications, one may also identify the lack of work at the depot and the struggle with keeping up dispersed social relations as consequences of the privatization of the train. This may be influenced by what Grasseni characterizes as “skilled visions“, which implies vision as a “powerful carrier of knowledge, sociality and identity” (Grasseni 2007: 8). Thus the implication in a hegemonic view may be uncovered by one’s own reflection on how a narrative is found.

Videos

After having read the introduction, a short film is suggested for viewing, before entering the interactive website. It is supposed to leave the recipient with some knowledge, some sense of the local atmosphere, but also some confusion, which reconstructs my impression while conducting fieldwork. The viewer of the film is confronted with moving images and sound that one may or may not be able to contextualize. This confusion of images, sounds and information aims to represent one's state of mind after a few days of fieldwork, which I predict to be a valuable and productive curiosity for the following process of knowledge.

The railroad region of Mali is a space of movement, as I argue in my thesis (Ramella 2013). Jay Ruby mentions the value of filming in such settings by stating that “[m]ovement, space, and time are the cultural variables for which the camera is best suited. [...] As the camera can only record bodies occupying space through time, it is these dimensions of culture that must be emphasized” (Ruby 2000: 47).

It is through the depiction of movement that the interactive website introduces the experience of finding one's way through a complex mesh of media. Within the elements of the website there are some shorter video-clips. While this material did not fit in the narrative portrayed in the linear film at the beginning, it serves the purpose of approaching various topics addressed in the texts, or of making connections with photos and sound recordings. The following video clip shows the example of Zakaló's story and the struggle of selling goods on the train and at the train windows. It is a topic addressed in the main film, but becomes a unique narrative by presenting it in a separate clip:

Zakaló



Click here to watch video: <https://vimeo.com/80724628>

© 2011 Anna Lisa Ramella

At the same time, the structure of the website allows the association of video-clips with a particular location on the map, whether it be where they were filmed, or places relating to certain subjects. Besides the clips edited from my own footage, the structure of the website also allows the insertion of local image production, as can be seen in this following clip:

August 1989



Click here to watch video: <https://vimeo.com/80724978>

© 1989 (Courtesy of) Sidy Sissoko

This clip shows original footage that was given to Sidy Sissoko, the protagonist of the homonymous text placed at the station of Soukoutaly, which tells his miraculous story and the story of his village in 1989. In August of that year, heavy rains washed away parts of the ground beneath the train tracks in Sidy's home village of Soukoutaly. Shortly after, as reconstructions started, a video was produced that documents the process of plenary discussions in the village as well as donation and rescue plans by neighbouring communities. This video shows first and furthest the destruction left behind by the rains: a big hole had gaped below the tracks, making them look as if they were lying on thin air like the tracks of a roller-coaster. When Sidy told me about this video, he added that he had never seen its content, although he had stored it in his house since the early nineties. Towards the end of my stay, I presented Sidy to Kaly, a video producer in Bamako, who had offered his help in tidying up the footage. As Kaly ran the tape through a recorder in order to digitize the content onto his small MiniDV camera, Sidy watched the images of his village in 1989 for the first time on a tiny screen and without sound. Kaly then handed a DVD copy to Sidy for further watching on a TV screen.

Photos

Other than in video, “[by] fixing the image photography allows us to observe more details than we would see in the moving image, which has the same characteristics as ordinary observation”, as Orobítg Canal argues, referring to Birdwhistell (Orobítg Canal 2004: 35). Although I would suggest that framing and focalization in video recordings do propose different or additional dimensions than observation in the field, I agree with the value of details and modes of focusing in the use of still images, which Orobítg Canal explains referring to Piette:

“Photography: (a) shows what the anthropologist/photographer wants to show in its framing, (b) allows us to see what had not been intended to be shown [...], (c) calls attention to those aspects which are invisible to the ordinary eye” (ibid. 2004: 35).

Furthermore, photography may reveal aspects of cultural spheres also beyond the image itself: the technical process of developing photographs and the influence of field conditions on the camera provide hints to sensory atmospheres which cannot be seen, such as temperature for example. In Mali and Senegal, I shot all photographs using my father's Canon A1 camera from 1978. Unfortunately, the camera was not very resistant to heat and only captured one out of ten photos I had taken, which is why I originally started using video as well. I had already developed some of the photos on location, at a small photo store near the Bamako station, in order to show them to the protagonists of the images. A slight difference in the colour is visible between the photos developed in my hometown Bremen and the ones developed in Bamako, due to the different liquids used and the difference that temperature makes to the development of the negatives.

1_Fofana_BKO



Photo of Fofana developed in Bamako
Photo by Anna Lisa Ramella

2_Fofana_HB



Photo of Fofana developed in Bremen

Photo by Anna Lisa Ramella

The use of photography also gave me the possibility to record visual material without having to introduce the video camera. Following Pink's suggestion of perceiving the camera as an actor in addition to a medium (Pink 2007: 48), shooting video triggered different interactional dynamics than the introduction of a photo camera to my interlocutors. In the train depot of Korofina, for example, my interlocutors were very eager to be photographed, but did not want their voices recorded (neither on camera nor on my audio recording device). They explained that they might risk their jobs, as anything said could be held against them. These suspicions come from the time when the railroad line between Dakar and Bamako was privatized and (according to my interlocutors) spies were sent to Korofina with cameras and recording devices, pretending they were journalists. The female railroaders, as another example, feared that their husbands might not be comfortable with their testimonies, which is why I chose to not talk about their stories at all.

The photo camera, on the other hand, introduced additional conversations about the visual culture of my interlocutors. In the case of Bazou, it led to finding out about his second job as photographer at a theme park, and to my visit there, as well as to conversations about his personal dealings with photography as 'memory-marker'.⁶

The photos in *LA VIE DU RAIL* mark visual links between the different elements. They are not named or described in order to enable the recipient's associations. In reference to the video of August 1989 that is shown in the last chapter (which on the website is located at the station of Soukoutaly), there is an image of Sidy watching the digitization of the tape on Kaly's small camera screen in his studio:

3_Sidy watches video



Sidy at Kaly's studio, watching the digitization of the 1989 video

Photo by Anna Lisa Ramella

The context of this photo can be found within the surrounding elements: the text *Sidy Sissoko* narrating the story of Sidy Sissoko and the video clip of 1989 (*August 1989*), which shows scenes from the original video, both located at the *Soukoutaly* station. It thereby marks one cross-link within a larger story told through these media combined.

Sound recordings

In the course of conducting fieldwork on the train and in its surroundings, my attention was specifically drawn to the sounds that accompanied each situation. There is something to the rhythm of the train rattling along the tracks that needs to be experienced with one's ears. In comparison to the film, where this sound accompanies or contrasts some of the moving images, here the soundscape leads the imagination into the field. Feld draws specific attention to the recording of sound in order to understand what he calls the "aural environments" in which people live (Feld 2004: 461). His term "acoustemology" describes "one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world." (Feld 1996, as in Feld and Brenneis 2004: 462).

In *LA VIE DU RAIL*, it is the sound on the tracks that accompanies the conductor through his days of riding.

Sound recording of train engine



Click here to watch video: <https://vimeo.com/80728214>

© 2011 Anna Lisa Ramella

The picture in the background shows the view of the train engine, from the conductor's perspective. Throughout the whole journey, this view does not change by much, since the Sahel is home to quite a predictable landscape.

But it is also this sound that makes communication so difficult. Before going to Mali, I had planned to conduct interviews on board the train. I must have imagined the almost ghost-like silence aboard some northern European trains. In a way, the inclusion of this sound recording on the website conveys also a reflection on the fieldwork experience on a moving object, demonstrates the volume that railroaders and vendors experience daily, and represents the repetitive rhythm of life along the rail.

Another very recurrent sound is the arrival of the train in a station. Suddenly, multilayered voices swell through the train windows, mostly offering goods to sell:

Sound recording of vendors at the train windows



Click here to watch video: <https://vimeo.com/80728328>

© 2011 Anna Lisa Ramella

As described and reflected in the text *The new Express* at the station of *Kita* on the website, the names of the products offered always end in the syllable “-be” as to mark that they are for sale. This soundscape is recurrent from station to station, though the goods being offered vary as well as the quantity of voices. For example, the station that is known to be the most convenient place to buy mangoes is *Kita*, which is where the text as well as the photo can be found on the virtual map. In the field, I have shown some of my sound recordings to the conductors Sidy Sissoko and Amadou Coulibaly, as well as other railroaders, and they could usually determine the stations and places by the sound. Sidy was even able to distinguish the sound of the train recorded from the engine and from one of the wagons farther behind. As seen in the short film at the beginning of the website, *LA VIE DU RAIL*⁷, the sound of the train horn is even a personal identification marker; conductors play their individual “melody” when arriving in the station. Zakaló, a vendor on the train, who also purchases some of his goods from the vendors at the stations, was able to distinguish the various stations by the type goods being offered by the recorded voices.

Trans-linear representation

In literature, for example, trans-linear approaches to narrative have meant experimenting with the creation of alternative stories (for example in Cortázar’s *Rayuela* from 1984, an alternative order of chapters is suggested in the beginning of the book). Interactive media provide broader possibilities for exploring this concept, even without the predetermination of multiple possible linear paths. As Caviezel argues in her conversation with Coover (Coover with Caviezel et al., 2012: 200), “[...] the idea of our *interactive form* of reception is to offer a user [...] the possibility to surf with his or her own ‘dramaturgy’ through the research material and, therefore, create an individualized ‘narrative’.”

LA VIE DU RAIL departs from this idea, combining the map structure with Ingold’s concept of the “meshwork” (Ingold 2009: 38): while the elements of the map have been authored

in the selection and clustering of topics, the choice of browsing through the material create an individual path of associations, and therefore diverse results. As Coover points out, “[The film editor] might have imagined countless possible versions, voices, and angles before arriving at a final, linear (single-channel) print” (Coover 2012: 191). Meanwhile, associative ‘hyperlinks’ within the singular linearities of the content may form the narrative structure of a meshwork, a trans-linear connection of ideas. The diversity of the elements allows one to grasp historical dimensions, detail, context and conflict in a tessellated, or rather transcendent structure of fragmented perceptions and thereby admits diverse linearities within the same work.

Similar to the fieldwork experience, the chronology of conversations or observations influences the understanding of a certain detail, or even subsequent information.

Drawing from the examples of the chapter on media compositions, the image of Sidy watching the old recordings from his village might trigger a completely different path depending on whether one has read about the incident of 1989 or watched the recordings before or after seeing this image. At the same time, one might not even understand the context at all and therefore focus on Sidy’s dealing with recording devices in general. In another example, if one has understood the queries of the vendors at the train in the video *Zakaló*, the sound recording of the multi-layered voices may convey a different sound. A recipient with Bambara knowledge would certainly even get a larger sense of the situation. This is what I mean by intersubjective participation, as argued in the following chapter.

The subjectivity in producing knowledge, which I argue here, includes my own interactions in the field. It inherits the idea that there are definitely persons I have not talked to, and information I have not obtained, which may have changed anything that can be found on this website. Therefore, *LA VIE DU RAIL* on a broader level also stands for the rejection of the idea that research and fieldwork material can ever be generalized or provide universal knowledge, as it is always only valid for this very specific situation and depends on the interaction of the subjects, including researcher, informants as well as recipients.

Dehierarchization through intersubjective participation

In planning and designing the website, the programmers and I were most concerned with reflecting the approach of de-hierarchization - practically but also visually. In terms of favouring a self-determined and intuitive navigation on the visual level, we chose aesthetically plain icons to avoid distraction:

4_LVDR_Icons



Screenshot: Icons for diverse media elements

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In this manner, the focus remains on the content, *favouring* it with the technical possibilities, instead of *interrupting* the navigation by technical obstacles.

The colour of the symbol for each element changes from white to grey once it has been viewed. The current element is marked in green. Depending on how many elements from one station have already been visited, the station mark changes to a darker shade of green. This offers orientation and overview so that the actual individual path can be followed without having to remember the stations or their elements that have already been accessed.

5_LVDR_Memory

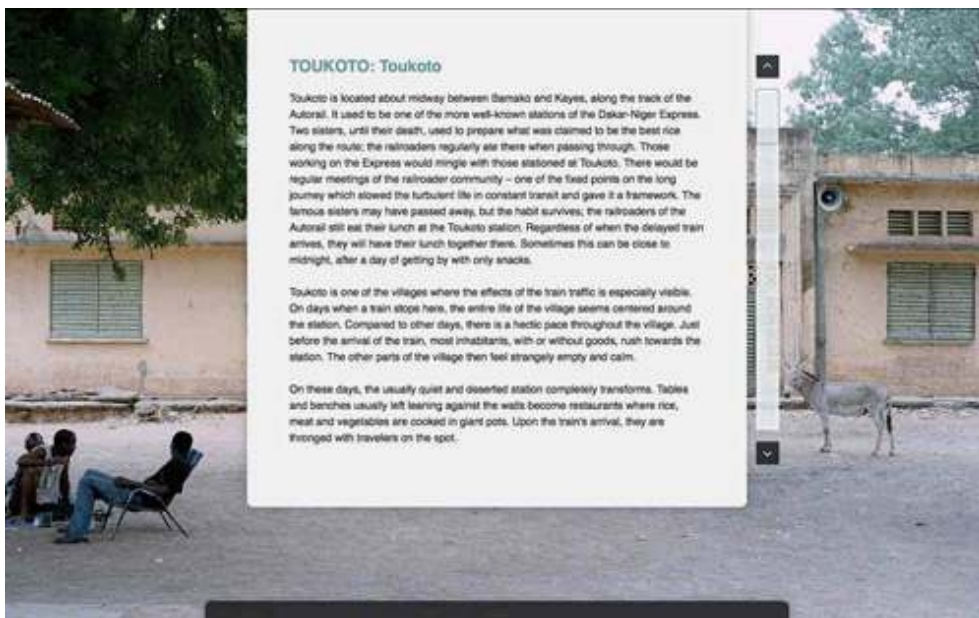


Screenshot: Colour change of accessed stations and elements

© 2013 Anna Lisa Ramella/ www.laviedurail.net

All of the elements are equipped with orientation marks to favour the individual process as will be shown in the following. These orientation marks are conceived in a similar manner as signs on a trail: the more orientation those signs provide, the more courage can be developed by the participant to try out new and unknown ways.

6_LVDR_Texts



Screenshot: Orientation bar for texts

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At the right side of the text, an indication is given about the length of the text and a reference about the position and excerpt of the current screen. The sheet size and the side bar accordingly change, depending on the screen size of the computer used. Texts can be scrolled using both the sidebar and the scrolling wheel/scrolling system of the touch pad. The background colour of the texts is a specific shade of greyish white that is least aggressive to the eye in order to be able to read longer texts with ease. When looking through a photo gallery, images appear in full size with fixed proportions. There is an orientation bar at the bottom that shows the total quantity of photos in the current gallery.

7_LVDR_Photos



Screenshot: Quantity indicator for Photo Galleries

© 2013 Anna Lisa Ramella/ www.laviedurail.net

The successive photo can be selected by clicking on the arrow, the photo facsimile on the bar or the arrow key, on the keyboard.

Videos and sound recordings are shown in full screen 16:9. A progress bar at the bottom of the screen shows the total length as well as the progression of the current screening.

8_LVDR_Sound



Screenshot: Length indicator for sound recordings

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The non-prioritized structuring of the mentioned elements reflects the intended reduction of a somewhat traditional triangle of hierarchy between informants, researcher and recipient. Tucker and Goodings have highlighted the value of bodily experiences in the process of understanding, by claiming the “[e]mbodiment [as] inseparable from the cognitive activity of the brain“ (Tucker/Goodings 2014: 57). The interactive structure of *LA VIE DU RAIL* invites users to immerse themselves in my own experience as a researcher, and in the knowledge brought in by the informants. By having to recur their own path through the material, however, the recipients are urged to participate actively and interact with the material in order to achieve their own process of knowledge-construction. Although the negotiation of power relations is by no means solved through the participative action of the recipient, the interaction which is provoked by a trans-linear structure does not only de-hierarchize authorship between researcher and recipient; the use of sensory and audiovisual media provides itself a more direct and democratized interaction with the testimonies, environment and imagery of the interlocutors, while the researcher takes a step back, abstaining from filtering the material through modes of interpretation and classification. However, one may claim the implied risk of empowering the recipient to decide their - potentially uncritical or unreflected - take on what is being “portrayed”. This criticism however implies a notion of authoritative responsibility of the author, which always suggests the potential underestimation of one’s readers and therefore, I argue, reproduces a hierarchy in its own right.

The edits of the film *LA VIE DU RAIL* as well as the clips, which of course provide narrative linearities of their own, are throughout constructed in a manner that disperses at the same time as it evokes. Very short cuts provide a somewhat chaotic, yet atmospheric experience, which, again, depends on the subjective dealings with not only the images themselves, but also with the very condition of the known vs. the unknown; one’s own stories become a part of the stories told in *LA VIE DU RAIL*. They are therefore just as

much part of the outcome as any of the elements found on the website and co-create the whole project within their own perception.

Beyond LA VIE DU RAIL

After having finished this web project in collaboration with Zentralnorden Kreativgesellschaft for layout and realization, I have often wondered about the individual paths that the recipients might have created. The few conversations and opportunities to watch a user accessing the site cannot stand for a concluding viewpoint on having succeeded in incorporating my premises in the interactive structure. While in generating and conceptualizing the website I have had associations and paths in mind, the media elements do represent connections to my own specific thoughts addressed in the texts. It would certainly be interesting to see if the chains of associations of various recipients actually differ, also considering different contexts of knowledge, background and experience. This could be managed by, on one hand, tracking the clicks on the website and, on the other, creating the possibility of sharing one's experiences with other recipients. In this sense, a dialogue could be encouraged that involved a multi-subjective interaction between the three subject roles within the project and from the recipients back to researcher and informants.

In a broader perspective, the option could also have been included to upload one's own audiovisual material onto the website and thereby enrich the experience of virtual train travel. I have tried to include these possibilities by linking the website to a *Facebook*-page that offers recipients the opportunity to post comments and share thoughts. As I have been able to discover by the profiles of *LA VIE DU RAIL*'s 'followers', there is an important amount of railroad-fans among them. I would state this insight into the motives of those interested in the site and its forthcoming as an advantage of social media. At the same time, it might not be the appropriate platform to expect an active engagement with the content in a way that would encourage participation. For me especially, as someone who just learned about trains during my research in Mali, I would appreciate a dialogue on broader contexts of trains and travel alongside my continuous self-perception as a learner rather than an expert.

Conclusion

LA VIE DU RAIL has been created to explore the construction of a reality that results through the intersection of the researcher's experiences, the audio-visual expression as well as the subjectivity of the recipient.

By examining the experience of my fieldwork, I was seeking a position within a scientific tradition that has explored many ways of avoiding one and the same dilemma: dealing with subjectivity in a scientific context. In brief, the desire to articulate a universal statement reaches its limits when the inevitable subjectivity of the researcher, the informants and temporality oppose it. At the same time, an openly subjective point of view provokes the criticism that it lacks scientific significance. However, I argue that the subjective decision of the researcher regarding methodology and presentation always form the basis of the research itself and should therefore be reflected in our work.

Taussig highlights the subjectivity of recorded material in the context of representation by stating the following:

“[...] I think it obvious that all objective recording is nothing more than what has been first run through and experienced by the observer. Such experience comes before representation, yet it is the writer’s responsibility to the reader to try all means and modes to make that experience as full and as obvious as possible.” (Taussig 2004: 313)

In the course of my considerations I realized that it is the search for an *appropriate* form of presentation that should take place above everything else. For the material and experiences that I have been confronted with after my return from Mali, the possibilities of creating an interactive website and thereby including the subjectivities of the participants on both sides, during fieldwork and as users of the website, seems to favour the non-hierarchical approach of my research. Though not all concerns that arise with the issue of representation can be avoided, I understand this website as an experiment towards a de-hierarchized, trans-linear narrative in which the allowance of subjectivities is a path towards a collaborative knowledge.

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NOTES

1. I use the word “accustomed” rather than “habitual” as to mark the relation to a schooling process, to having learned a specific vision through one’s experiences and surrounding narrative structures.
2. See e.g. *Transit spaces at Toukoto* (www.laviedurail.net)
3. See e.g. *Amadou Coulibaly at Korofina* (www.laviedurail.net)
4. See e.g. *Bazou at Bamako* (www.laviedurail.net)
5. See e.g. *Bobane at Kayes* (www.laviedurail.net)
6. Consult text *Bazou*, station of *Bamako* (www.laviedurail.net) for further details.
7. To view the full film, access either www.laviedurail.net or <http://vimeo.com/43617132>

ABSTRACTS

This article reflects on the advantages as well as the challenges of interactive media productions as a form of (re-)presentation for ethnographic and anthropological research. It draws upon the example of the interactive website www.laviedurail.net, which retraces the Malian part of the former Dakar-Niger Express train track. The website invites users to take stops at different stations where mutual influence with the train determines life along the rail. By choosing an order in which media elements such as photos, videos, sound recordings and texts are addressed, the recipient creates a subjective path of knowledge. While a multimedia presentation offers a de-hierarchized and trans-linear approach, at the same time it cannot avoid the selective character of the material. Therefore, it becomes necessary to perceive and reflect recipient, informants as well as researcher as subjects of the project.

Este artículo reflexiona sobre las ventajas así como sobre los retos de los nuevos medios interactivos como forma de (re-)presentación para la investigación etnográfica y antropológica. Me baso en el ejemplo de la web interactiva www.laviedurail.net, que pone de relieve el aporte maliano en la construcción de la antigua línea férrea entre Dakar y Níger. La página web invita a los usuarios a detenerse en diferentes estaciones donde la relación que se establece con el tren va determinando el devenir de la vida a lo largo del viaje por la vía férrea. Escogiendo el orden en el que fotos, vídeos, grabaciones sonoras y textos son presentados, el usuario crea un itinerario de conocimiento subjetivo. Mientras que una presentación multimedia ofrece una perspectiva desjerarquizada y trans-lineal, no puede evitar sin embargo el carácter selectivo del material. En consecuencia, resulta necesario percibir y considerar el receptor, los informantes así como el investigador como sujetos del proyecto.

Cet article aborde les avantages et les enjeux des media interactifs comme forme possible de (re)présentation pour les recherches ethnographiques et anthropologiques. Ces réflexions s'appuient sur l'exemple d'un site web interactif www.laviedurail.net qui décrit la partie malienne de ce qui était au paravent le train Express Dakar-Niger. Le site web invite les utilisateurs à s'arrêter à différentes stations où des interactions, provoquées par le passage du train, influent sur la vie le long des voies de chemin de fer. En choisissant l'ordre dans lequel les éléments audio visuels, photos, enregistrements sonores, vidéos, textes sont présents, le spectateur crée un accès subjectif au savoir. Alors que la présentation multimédia offre une approche sans hiérarchie et trans-linéaire, en même temps cela ne permet pas d'éviter le caractère sélectif du support. Ainsi il devient nécessaire de percevoir et de concevoir comme sujets à part entière du projet les destinataires, les informateurs et les chercheurs.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Interactive media; de-hierarchization; non-linear representations; digital ethnography; multimedia; trans-linearity; intersubjectivity; mobility; railroad; West Africa

Palabras claves: medios interactivos, desjerarquización, representaciones no lineales, etnografía digital, multimedia, trans-linealidad, intersubjetividad, movilidad, ferrocarril, África del Oeste

AUTHOR

ANNA LISA RAMELLA

Universität Bremen, Institut für Ethnologie und Kulturwissenschaft
ramella@uni-bremen.de