

## JULIA YEZBICK, TRAJETÓRIA DE UMA ANTROPÓLOGA VISUAL QUE MISTURA CINEMA E ARTE

Ana Luiza Carvalho da Rocha<sup>1</sup>  
Cornelia Eckert<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

On October 19, 2018, the visual anthropologist Julia Yezbick gave the bi-annual conference at the Department of Anthropology at Baldwin Hall at the University of Georgia, in the city of Athens, Georgia, United States. With a background in Harvard University, Julia Yezbick is an anthropologist, filmmaker and artist with an interest in media practice, space, the senses, & processes of making. On this occasion, it was possible to request an interview about her trajectory and film production so that we could disseminate her research in Brazil. Julia tells us about her intellectual trajectory, her training in visual anthropology.



Fig 1. Julia Yezbick

Photo credit: own work

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<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal do rio Grande do Sul, FEEVALE, Brasil. Email: [miriabilis@gmail.com](mailto:miriabilis@gmail.com)  
ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2294-5932>

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. Email: [chickaekert@gmail.com](mailto:chickaekert@gmail.com)  
ORCID id: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2815-7064>

**In your academic training you produced films. Tell us about your master's and doctorate.**

I completed a Masters in Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester in 2004. This program provides a unique combination of traditional classroom/book-based learning and hands-on instruction in filmmaking practice. From this point on, I became interested in the relationship between theory and practice (specifically media production). How do the two inform each other? In what ways are they inextricable? And what are the limits or constraints of each? I have always been drawn to the inductive methodologies of ethnographic field practices and over the years I have realized that I also work this way when making my films. I conceive of my filmmaking practice as a process of inquiry in its own right. It is often entangled with more conventional modes of research (participant observation, etc) but there are things I learn with and through the processes of producing media that I find difficult to do with pen and paper alone. My experiences at Manchester were rich and fruitful but left me yearning for an approach to filmmaking that did not see aesthetic considerations as denigrations or manipulations of “the real.” The approach to filmmaking taught in Manchester’s program at the time was a bit too dogmatic in its interpretation of the stance of “humility” espoused by practitioners of observational cinema.

I was hungry for a practice that expanded upon the tenets of observational cinema and so I was thrilled to discover Harvard’s PhD program in Media Anthropology, where the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) was just getting off the ground and students were being supported and encouraged to explore innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography. I was at Harvard from 2008 to 2016 and during this time had the privilege of working alongside students and faculty who were radically rethinking the relationship between audio-visual production and anthropology. During this time, I worked as the teaching fellow for the flagship year-long course in which students produced short videos on topics of their interest. As part of my degree requirements at Harvard, I produced and defended a short film in conjunction with my written dissertation in Anthropology and made and defended a second film for the newly minted certification program in Critical Media Practice. Harvard is one of a handful of graduate programs that combines “theory” and “practice” in this way.

**Also tell us about other films related to your activities as anthropologist and filmmaker. The field surveys, the year of release, the content of each film.**

#### WORK FROM DETROIT

I have made several short films since moving to Detroit in 2011 and am continuing to do so.



Fig. 2 Poster from the “*How to Rust*” exhibition and talk

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*How to Rust* (2016, Super8, HD video, 25:40) is a short essay film that explores the relationship between the production of material goods and the production of histories. Detroit artist, Olayami Dabls, describes his installation “Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust” as a metaphor for the forced assimilation of Africans to European culture and language, referencing a racial tension still palpable in the city. Dabls’ bricolage of the

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postindustrial landscape becomes an implicit commentary on the half-life of Fordism as the film weaves a fable told in iron, wood, rocks, and mirrors. As the relationship between cultural production and place is being recast, *How to Rust* comments upon how we mythologize a former glory and shape an imagined future.

*Into the Hinterlands* (2015, HD video, 39:06) is an immersive single-channel video that conveys the creative process of a small performance ensemble, called The Hinterlands, in Detroit. The Hinterlands practice a form of ecstatic training which they see as a provocation towards the unknown — a space both physical and imaginary whose mystery is its source of creative generation. I trained with the ensemble for a year, always filming while physically participating and looking for new ways to “see” with the camera. Each training followed an unscripted, non-verbal improvisation in which we explored ways to communicate through movement. Compositions made from local field recordings aurally gesture toward the world beyond, conjuring the space of an inverted hinterland, an unknown inside to be plumbed for meaning and inspiration. Sounds of the post-industrial environment fill the room while the embodied camera immerses the viewer in the ecstatic experience; merging the space of their ludic play with the liminal space of the cinema.

*Carbon Arts* (2014, 32 mins, HD video), is a silent gallery piece that documents the performative iron-pouring of a Detroit-based groups of artists that work with molten iron. It follows the teams of leather-clad workers as they perform an iron-pouring with a 35-ton cupola in a snow blizzard in Detroit, MI.

*Delray* (2013, 16.5 minutes) is a four-channel audio composition recorded at a small forgings factory on the south side of Detroit. It is minimally processed and speaks to the production end of the iron supply chain in the region. This piece will be included on a forthcoming album looking at the social, historical, and material legacy iron in Detroit.

*Twenty Sketches* (2013-ongoing, 3-minute or less videos) is an on-going series of super short portraits of Detroit-based artists. These “sketches” are meant to be a video equivalent to a gesture-sketch in drawing, aiming for broad strokes of portraiture and

the essences of what is being portrayed rather than a refined and crystal-clear picture of something/someone.

#### WORK FROM SOUTH ASIA

I also have done fieldwork in south Asia (specifically Nepal and Kerala, India) between 2003 and 2010. These short videos came out of that research.

*Indian for Spinach* (2010) is a multimedia, web-based essay (text with 9 short videos). This was an experiment in multimodal research, trying to think about the juxtaposition of various types of text with embedded video. Much of my work is attempting to determine the productive edges of friction between text or word and image and the ways in which to best cross fluidly between them.

*Bound on Earth* (2010, 22 minutes; HD single-channel video) is a short documentary portrait along the water's edge in Kerala, India. A meditation on labor and faith, this short video renders the rhythm of daily life, the cadence of work, and the tempo of devotion in a concatenation of floating. Following a group of Muslim and Christian fishermen who operate the "Chinese fishing nets" in Cochin, this piece explores the ways in which rhythm, materiality, and tempo inform our understandings of a place and structure the temporality of daily rituals.

*Chronotope 1.0* (2009, 6 minutes) is a looping single-channel gallery video in which a gaunt cow stands amid the rushing traffic of a Katmandu street. Chronotope, a term coined by literary theorist, M.M. Bakhtin, describes the connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships. This film uses this concept to comment upon context and contingency, asking the viewer to consider the precarity of a cow standing in traffic. It was recorded in Nepal in 2004 and edited in 2009. All of the audio was recorded within a one mile radius of the cow. The temporal and spatial distance of the film's making take on new meaning when we consider that this street and many of the surrounding temples in which the audio was recorded were severely damaged or destroyed in the earthquake of 2015.

*a small light* (2004, 30 minutes), is a single-channel documentary video that I filmed in Nepal for my masters thesis film at the Granada Center for Visual Anthropology (Manchester, UK). Through following the daily life of a home for the elderly in Kathmandu, Nepal, run by Catholic nuns but situated beside the cremation ghats of Pashupathinath Hindu temple, this film explores cross-religious views on old age, death and karma.

**Tell us about the circulation of your films, national and international festivals.**

*Into the Hinterlands* (2015) premiered at Berlin International Film Festival in 2015 and was picked up for European distribution by Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art E.V. *How to Rust* (2016) premiered at the Ann Arbor Film Festival in 2016 and was awarded the Best Regional Filmmaker award. Both films have educational distribution from Cinema Guild and are included in their Sensory Ethnography Lab collection. I regularly give talks and do public presentations of the work at universities and galleries mostly in the US but occasionally abroad. *a small light* (2004) is distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute in the UK as part of their Granada Center for Visual Anthropology Student Film series.

**You also produce a journal. Tell us about it.**

Yes, I am the founding and managing editor of an online journal called Sensate ([www.sensatejournal.com](http://www.sensatejournal.com)). Launched in 2010, Sensate is in its ninth year of publication now. Sensate was born out of a desire for scholarly journals that could accommodate time-based and media-based scholarship. Our mission is to provide a scholarly and artistic forum for experiments in critical media practices that expand academic discourse by taking us beyond the margins of the printed page. Fundamental to this expansion is a re-imagining of what constitutes a work of scholarship or art. To that end, Sensate accepts and encourages non-traditional submissions such as audiovisual ethnographic research, multimedia mash-ups, experiments in media archaeology, time-based media, participatory media projects, or digitized collections of archival media, artifacts, or maps. Just last year we launched a new face of the site with major overhauls

to our organization and navigation, and through a partnership with Harvard's Critical Media Practice program we are working on developing new tools for our contributors to accommodate not only non-linear sequential scholarship but spatialization of multiple media components as well.

Sensate also has started to work with collections that are both print-based and digital such as the stunning and innovative Flint Magazine, (<http://www.flintmagazine.org/>) whose digital content is published on Sensate.

### **What are your next projects?**

I am currently working on several short film projects in and around Detroit, MI, where I live. I just completed a month-long residency in Beirut in September of 2018 during which I shot super8mm for a new work that will be looking at both Detroit and Beirut as cities that have complicated relationships with their immediate pasts. I am also producing an album of field recording compositions about iron and its impact on Detroit's urban and social landscape and finishing a psychedelic western, called *Manifest Destiny!*, that is a critical commentary on gentrification and postindustrial frontierism.

*Manifest Destiny!* is an adaptation of a progressive theater piece by the performance ensemble, The Hinterlands. It is a Wild West show transposed onto the post-industrial "frontier" of Detroit—a production of the real that lays bare American mythmaking, past and present. Themes of valor and displays of strength and fortitude speak to icons of the stalwart American that are finding new expression in today's precarious economic climate. This film critically depicts the modern mythologies of Detroit as the "Wild West" thoughtfully drawing out the ways in which places and peoples are mythologized through the consumption of spectacularized versions of histories and the entangled threads of fiction and reality.

In addition to these media projects, I am also working on co-writing a book with my sister, Rachel Yezbick (<https://rachelyezbick.com/>) who is also an anthropologist and an artist and most recently worked at Sundance Institute in their New Frontiers (Virtual Reality) program. We are writing a book that takes a critical look at immersive experiences from ethnographic field methodologies as championed by 20th century anthropologists to emerging technologies that provide immersive experiences such as Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR). Advances in immersive technologies raise

new questions about what it means to have an experience, witness an event, or to be changed in some way by what we see, hear or touch. This book will frame current developments in VR and AR within the socio-historical context of ethnographic encounters as a project of experiential, immersive, knowledge production now extrapolated and borrowed by technologists creating politically charged consumer experiences. Through our respective experience in both fields, we will look at what can be gleaned from the colonial history of anthropological claims to authoritative first-hand experience to better understand emergent technologies such as VR and AR.

**How do you consider today the field of visual anthropology in the United States, in terms of training, production, circulation of productions, financing?**

Visual anthropology as a “field” has somehow always been a bit marginal, never quite gaining the same epistemological foothold as medical anthropology, for example. However, I think this marginality has been to its benefit as it has allowed the “field” (if we can even call it that) to be flexible and pliable in a way that keeps it fresh and multifaceted. I wish there were more programs in the US teaching and training students, but while there may be very few “visual anthropology” programs, there are a growing number of more broadly conceived practice-based graduate programs such as the University of Colorado, Boulder’s new program in Critical Media Practice and Duke’s program in Experimental Documentary. And this, I find very encouraging. I think a growing number of educational institutions are realizing the importance of teaching their students to be critical and literate practitioners of media production. We know that screens are pervasive today and increasingly audio-visual communications are structuring our modes of social interaction. But we need more students to be actively critical about the ways in which they both consume and produce media or we may find ourselves awash in soup of “fake news,” charades, and ventriloquisms that could have devastating and irreversible effects. In terms of circulation of productions, I am encouraged by the ways in which films made by anthropologists are screening to wider audiences than just festivals that keep to a purview of “ethnographic film.” Now is not the time for silos in our thinking, making, or distribution. We need to radically re-make



*Julia Yezbick, trajectory of a visual anthropologist who mixes cinema and art*

visual anthropology to produce informed, articulate, and talented students to take on the relevant concerns of our time.

**Do you have any thoughts about visual anthropology made in Brazil, or Latin America? Other continents?**

I'm sad to say that I do not— I haven't had enough (or any!) experiences of visual anthropology in Latin America. Maybe I'll have to come to Brazil for a visit!



Fig. 3. At the Baldwin Hall

Photo credit: own work

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