

FILMS AND VIDEOS AS FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

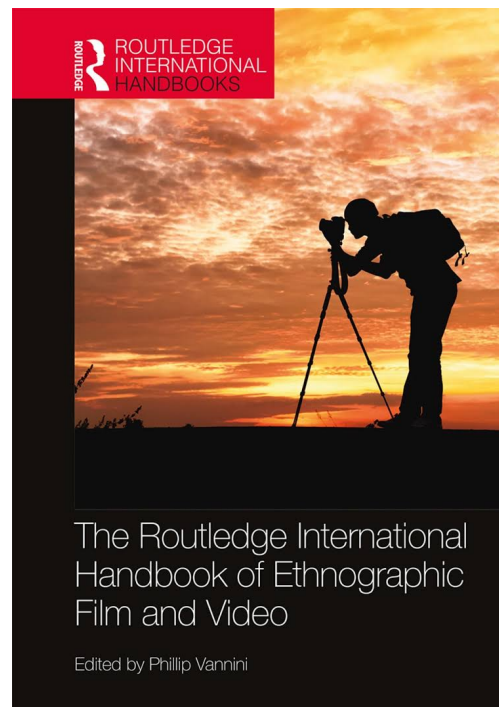
DOI
10.11606/issn.2525-3123.
gis.2021.177064

Vannini, Phillip Ed. 2020. *The Routledge International Handbook of Ethnographic Film and Video*. London and New York: Routledge. 359p. ISBN: 978-0-367-18582-4 (hbk) ISBN: 978-0-429-19699-7 (ebk)


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¹ This review was written as part of my post-doctoral research activities at the Department of Anthropology - University of São Paulo. I would like to thank the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) for the grant (2017/ 21063-1).




Fifty years ago, visual anthropologists, then a special class of researchers and filmmakers, were enthusiastic about the technological revolution of the time - the possibility of capturing sound and images in sync with portable and light equipment. However, they could not have imagined where the global phenomenon of the internet would take us, which at the time was more of a promise than a reality. In the past twenty years, we have seen the emergence of low-cost, easy-to-use cell phones with video cameras, drones and portable cameras giving a chance to billions of people around the world to document their lives and make video accessible and storable; social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp, in addition to video sharing platforms, turned the circulation of these materials into a new globalized and widespread practice of visual documentation.

It is from standpoint of technological development and internet revolution that the collection *The Routledge International Handbook of Ethnographic Film and Video*, published in English by Routledge, is made public. The editor of this book is Phillip Vannini, a professor at the School of Communication and Culture at Royal Roads University in Victoria, Canada and a professor at the Canada Research Chair in Public Ethnography. The inclusion of the word “video” in a field that has always privileged the term “ethnographic film” comes precisely from the editor’s finding that the definition of what ethnographic film is has dramatically expanded with the advent of internet, which has changed not only the ways in which ethnographic films and videos are accessed, but how and whom they are made for.

With an emphasis on practices conducted by visual anthropologists and researchers from other disciplines that employ film and video today, the book offers the reader a “state of the art” overview regarding the use of film and video in ethnographic research. The thirty-one articles bring a great variety of themes, approaches, methodologies, epistemologies, theories, ontologies, aesthetics, ethical questions, and other paths through which the authors explore in their research and productions. The authors speak from a variety of positions (researchers, directors, filmmakers, curators of ethnographic films, among others) while sharing insights from their own works. This resulted in a collection of alive texts and original narratives. At the same time, they provide a powerful mapping of contemporary production, or at least a part of it, since most of the articles was written by authors located in the United States or Europe.

The effort of the volume is to open the field of ethnographic film and video, and this is done in various ways. For instance, by incorporating its use in other fields of study, such as sociology, geography, arts, history, psychology, environmental studies, cultural studies, media studies, among others – which, by its turn, reflects the expansion of ethnography beyond the boundaries of the anthropology. Also, by opening about the films



and videos production processes, the practical and technical issues, the book reveals for the readers something that is spoken about less but that everyone faces when they are set out to film “their” field. This opens some space for experimentation within the language of cinema and other art forms. Collaborative forms of production increasingly expand leading to a shared of authorship between the parts involved in various productions. The sense and meaning are also shared, as in interactive documentaries, where the spectator orchestrates the editing and composes the story that is about to be told.

With this opening gesture, the texts in this volume, put together, amplify the very notion of what ethnographic film is, a “without limit, a process with unlimited possibility, an artefact with unlimited variation” (Weinberger apud Dattatreyan 2020, 293), by understanding that, in the XXIst century, one must consider the challenges and opportunities of producing ethnographic audiovisual content that is critically engaged in the digital era. By following this line of thought, the readers might ask themselves if visual anthropology should rethink its own label in order to follow these technology and media developments - a step already taken by the recognized journal of the American Anthropological Association in 2017, when their section of visual anthropology changed its name to “Multimodal Anthropology”, following the growing consensus that ethnographic film production should actively embrace other forms of work in new digital media platforms (Wright 2020, 50). Indeed, if anthropology, or other fields of study that use video and film in their processes, still had any doubt regarding how the centrality of different medias and digital platforms and their role in the production of knowledge, the covid-19 pandemic has proven otherwise, by putting the world in isolation and forced us to perform our activities, or most of them, remotely via internet. Therefore, despite the sad and painful moment that humanity now faces, it must be said that the collection comes at a good time and helps us in building our tools and ways of thinking and producing knowledge in digital interfaces, in this herculean effort of reinventing research methodologies with which various disciplines are dealing with.

Despite celebrating this publication, it is always important to recognize its contours and limits. After all, no matter how open and bold the editorial line may be, it will still not captivate everyone. Aware of this, the editor himself warns that the book will not please the reader who seeks film analysis, historical and epistemological discussions about the field of ethnographic film and video, to avoid debates that are only of interest to some disciplines. There are classic collections that can be consulted (Banks and Morphy 1997; Crawford and Turton 1992 or Hockings 1975, among others), and even Brazilian collections accessible to the reader in Portuguese (Feldman-Bianco and Moreira Leite 1998; Barbosa et al 2009

and Copque e Peixoto 2015, to name a few). Although the editor claims that the book is for diverse audiences, I venture to say that the work speaks to the youngest in a more expressive way, due to how familiar this new generation is with equipment, cameras, platforms, apps, since they have always been part of their lives.

A certain constant in the articles is the emphasis on increasingly participatory, collaborative and shared processes. Here, a huge range of possibilities for participation and collaboration are presented and, strictly speaking, each research and each project measures and shapes the way the collaboration will take place. There are references to Jean Rouch's shared anthropology in some of the works, but the ethical stance as a central issue is certainly a mark of the critical turn in the production of knowledge during the 1970s and 1980s. An important milestone in anthropology was the publication of *Writing Culture*, recently translated into Portuguese (Clifford and Marcus 2017[1986]). Collaborative productions do not happen only between researchers and filmed subjects, but also within the scope of academic reflection, which is attested by the high number of articles written in co-authorship.

The task of condensing in a few pages a project of such magnitude, in its potential and scope is somehow disenchanting. Yet, my task is to synthesize themes, approaches, and problematics that for obvious reasons some of it will be left out. In order to repair this frustration, at least in part I chose to discuss the volume part by part in as much detail as possible.

What is an ethnographic film? Part I of the collective book "Practicing the art and science of ethnographic film and video", focuses on the conceptual and theoretical foundations around the notion of ethnographic film and video with an emphasis on contemporary production. The article by P. Kerim Friedman, which opens the section, aims on reflecting on the definitions of the genre. Instead of just gravitating among the canons, the author builds on his experience as a curator of an ethnographic film festival, the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival (TIEFF).

By looking at contemporary ethnographic film production, Faye Ginsburg (2018) suggests that the field's achievements are advancing in two possible directions. On the one hand, one direction draws from the observational school of documentary film and develops formal experiments with film's sensorial aspects, such as the work of the Laboratory of Sensory Ethnography at the University of Harvard², and, on the other hand, anthropologist filmmakers who seem to be more concerned with relational aspects, collaborative, shared production and indigenous media.


2 Ver <https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/>.

Regarding the relational aspects of film, the article by Stephanie Spray dedicates itself to the difficult issue of constructing the representation of the other that in the act of filming implies, which is, inevitably, an objectifying act. The author defends a collaborative and shared film practice, against dominant ways of making documentaries. Evaluating the formal aspect and moving around art and anthropology, the articles by Jenny Chio and Robert Willim, both intended to open the field of ethnographic film production and leave space for artistic experiments. Chio develops a relation to ethnographic theory and relates it to the practices of art probing. Willim on the other hand, forwards an artistic and research process combining reflective analysis and non-representational practice.

Wright's article goes from Ginsburg's (2018) argument mentioned earlier to argue that if there is fertile ground for the expansion of ethnographic film, this place is the combination of relational inventiveness with an openness to formal experimentation as a the new art of ethnographic cinema. In this sense, multimodal means allow new forms of sharing production process and, at the same time, aesthetic experimentation. This is the subject of the article written by Samuel Gerald Collins and Matthew Durlington, which closes the section, with a defense of the transition from traditional ethnographic means to multimodality.

The second part of the volume "Applying and extending approaches and methodologies", brings contributions where the videos and film's methodological use reveal quite a different research traditions. From various possibilities, there are authors who use video as a tool to support ethnographic analysis in the fieldwork, such as the works of Asta Cekaite, who discusses the use of video in research and ethnomethodological analysis, an approach that proposes recordings video to engage in an analysis closer to social life. This is followed by Charlotte Bates' contribution, who focuses on daily videos filmed by the research interlocutors generating material for ethnographic analysis. The article by Robert Lemelson and Annie Tucker takes a different path by emphasizing film results that get closer to the language of cinema to impact the viewer. These are films centered on character narratives about crises, traumas, mental illnesses, among other themes that touch the interface between psychology and anthropology.

Discussing the documentary product, but in a different way, there is the work of Kathleen M. Ryan and David Staton about nonlinear interactive documentary. The authors argue that this kind of documentary, by giving way to the audience's narrating agency, presents itself as an alternative form to the traditional documentary, in which the authority of the editor and researcher imposes a narrative line. In this same atmosphere of criticizing the researcher / director's authority, the section ends with an article by Molly Merryman. The author discusses the scarcity of gender




and sexuality researchers in the field of ethnographic film and video. She critiques the field harshly by stating that this is due to the fact that its practitioners are mostly heterosexual white men, which make the sub-field blind to the dynamics and issues of women and sexual minorities.

The third part of the collection, “Developing genres and styles”, is dedicated to the genres and styles of making films and ethnographic videos. Here we see, again, the emphasis on collaborative and shared forms of production and the concern with the work’s form, emphasizing the sensorial aspects and creativity in the production processes. Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier’s chapter highlights sound in the construction of the ethnographic film, often relegated to the background by filmmakers-anthropologists. The author argues that sound, used in a creative way, can contribute by creating emotions and constructing of a sense of place, space and time, which is exemplified by her experience in making a documentary in the city of Guantánamo, Cuba. Lorenzo Ferrarini and Kathy Kasic also explore narrative possibilities from their work. Ferrarini tells us about what he calls a hybrid documentary, an emerging trend within the making of documentary films that mix fiction and documentary. Kasic, by recovering film works in which the experiential and immersive aspects weighs, fully explores the sensory aspect of the film while developing cognitive and linguistic aspects such as interviews and narration, which he calls “sensorial verité”, sensorial truth, in clear allusion to Jean Rouch’s *cinéma verité*.

Anne Harris’ article presents some conceptual and methodological principles of ethnocinema, an approach of non-representative research based on video as a practice of relational and creative research in the intercultural encounter between researcher and interlocutors. The criticism of the use of digital media weighs in the approach, which is also the tone of Peter Biella’s article on interactive media. Although the author has been working to legitimize the use of nonlinear tools in academic research for years, he points out critically to the problem that is the constant dependence on updating technology.

The fourth part, “Working with others” is dedicated to the challenges and ethical dilemmas involved in working with the “other”. Paul Wolfram’s, in this section’s first text, brings up ethical issues involved in the practice of making ethnographic films, and drawing from his own experience, makes quite didactic considerations to guide the researcher when living and working with people in the field.

Collaborative processes in the making of an ethnographic film do not happen only in the stages of project design and capturing images and sounds in the field. The article by Rose Satiko Gitirana Hikiji, the only Brazilian



author in the collection, and Jasper Chalcraft, explore the potential of collaboration in post-production stage. At the center of the reflection is the process of making the narration and soundtrack for a film made with a Congolese artist living in São Paulo, Brazil.

Arjun Shankar's critical and dense article points to the limits of what the author calls the ideal of participation, functioning as a sober and necessary voice, somewhat contradicting the celebration of ways of producing knowledge in a participatory and collaborative manner. For the author, there is a certain tyranny of the ideal of participation that converts the subjects' consent in relation to research and filming projects into a new form of objectification. Sarah Abbott's article also questions the limits of working with "others", but in a different way, expanding the very notion of what constitutes the "other", to include non-humans as subjects of the films: plants, stones, mountains, land, and water. For instance, this type of investigation helped by the role of technology (portable cameras, drones etc.) enable us to pay more attention to nocturnal habits of predators or fly over entire forests.

The centrality of technology and the new possibilities of ontological research that are breaking open are further explored in the fifth part of the collection, "Working with tools and techniques". Katrina M. Brown and Petra Lackova explore the potential of wearable cameras, often known as GoPros, a major innovation of the second decade of the 21st century. Adam Fish deals with the new technology of drones and their anthropological possibilities and Mark R. Westmoreland addresses experiences with 360° video in the construction of immersive experiences.

In the case of both 360° cameras and drones, as well as wearable cameras, the visions produced broaden a human perspective and open the possibility of radically expanding our perspectives - epistemologically and ontologically - to other world views, such as the perspective of the body of a bird, from the head of a cyclist or from the atmosphere, expanding ways of seeing and the agency of the beholder. The development of technology can take us far, but also as close to us as possible, like the worktable of an ethnographer. Steffen Köhn's chapter, which closes this section, addresses documentaries recorded on computer screens, emphasizing the poetics of digital culture as a powerful way of producing knowledge.

Part 6, "Distributing and circulating", is dedicated to the circulation and distribution of films and ethnographic videos, a theme that has grown in importance. In the chapter that opens the section, Harjant S. Gill offers the reader some guidance and advice from his long experience of producing and distributing ethnographic films, such as, for example, defining the audience in advance, having authorizations of the subjects that were filmed and photos in high quality, to use to promote the films.

Ethnographic film festivals are not the only places where the audio-visual products circulate. Today, web-based platforms offer great potential for ethnographers-filmmakers. This is what Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan's article looks at, arguing that this form of circulation allows for a more democratic distribution and greater agency for the public. The presence and circulation of videos and films in academic environments is the subject of Catherine Gough-Brady's article. How to make a film without so many resources, and without access to equipment, financing and technicians? These and other practical issues involved in the production of films as part of graduate work are themed by the author.

The chapter that closes the section examines the phenomenon of the expansion of ethnographic film festivals and how the cinema format changed the ways in which we understand the field of ethnographic film. Carlo Cubero argues that ethnographic film festivals, as events that attract audiences and filmmakers from within and outside anthropology, select films for their ability to engage an audience, rather than for their ability to illustrate or present themselves as proof of anthropological ideas based on texts.

We are about to arrive at the finish line of this long journey. Two final chapters to take on the conclusions. The first one is a very technical round of questions and answers with some of the collaborators of the collection about how they carry out their film work. The second text brings Jean Rouch, a canon of the field, but in an unusual way.

If there is one thing that seems to remain in the ethnographer's job, it is also to be an apprentice and thus, there is no way to walk into the future and open new paths without knowing what the elders said. In this case, the griot is the old and well-known Jean Rouch, brought by the voice of Paul Stoller, who signs the final article. However, contrary to expectations, Stoller does not provide us with an analysis of Rouch's already well-known work; he chooses to tell us how the wisdom of the Songhay people profoundly shaped Rouch's approach to anthropology and the world, and how this approach can shape future works in visual anthropology. Although it may sound seemingly simple, the depth of the relationship that the ethnographer builds with his others seems to be the basis for present and future visual ethnography, at least that is what Stoller learns from Rouch, and what Rouch teaches readers of the collection. If the opening gesture broadened and expanded, under the risk of tearing apart the field of ethnographic film and video, the ethnographic intention appears to be the gesture that sustains and that gives ground to the field. With this gesture, Rouch teaches us, films and records are constructed as narratives open to the world.

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Submitted: 10/04/2020

Accepted: 10/06/2020