"Theory is the death of the film": an interview with Anna Grimshaw about Antropology and the craft of film editing

Entrevista com Anna Grimshaw

ENTREVISTADORA

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If you have been paying attention to the ins and outs of anthropology in the last couple of decades, you have probably noticed that the field of visual anthropology has gained vertiginous academic traction not only in Brazil but worldwide. The reasons for this are manifold, but it is a fact that the ease of use and relatively low cost of audiovisual equipment brought about by the digitalization of the filmmaking process has immensely contributed to the growth — in number and in quality — of films produced inside anthropology departments. However, the extent to which the filmmaking process has been the object of scholarly investigation in the social sciences thus far has largely coincided with the need for affirming its appropriateness as a research method; close to no serious inquiry has sought to convey to the academic community the "flesh and blood" or the "spirit" (MALINOWSKI, 2015, p.23) of contemporary practices of recording and editing film. An unfortunate result of neglecting to study the skilled practices of the filmmaker is their continued absence from a public forum where they can be scrutinized and debated in ways that advance the possibilities of harnessing their features —and even their quirks— to the benefit of the anthropologist.

Certain anthropologists do reflect seriously on their own filmmaking practice, and talking to them can be an enlightening experience for novice practitioners and veterans alike. When I set out to interview British anthropologist Anna Grimshaw — back when I was just starting the research for my master's dissertation—, I knew I wanted to combine my interest in visual anthropology with the experience I had accrued as a filmmaker collaborating with anthropologists in the editing room. The nitty-gritty of how that would work, however, was still worrisomely unclear. What this hour-long conversation did for my research was to reinforce the deep-seated impression I had that, by studying the editing process, I would discover something valuable about the practice of anthropology itself and vice-versa. So, when I came

back to this transcript — more than a year after Anna and I had talked —, I could not help but smile when it hit me that much of what she had said then –that I had attributed to her being a visual anthropologist– I would later find seconded by non-anthropologist film editors whose essays I would read and with whom I would speak. Indeed — as Anna had tacitly known all along —, editing film is a crafted way of doing anthropology, and with the time approaching for my study into the technique of film editing and its affinity with the anthropological venture to see the light of day (BRANCO, forthcoming), I found it imperative to publish the entirety of this interview to kickstart a conversation about how the editing room can serve as a locus of production of anthropological knowledge.

Here's a quick biography of the discussants: Anna Grimshaw received her PhD in social anthropology in 1984 from the University of Cambridge, and is currently a tenured professor of visual anthropology at Emory University. She has written more than a dozen articles on themes related to visual anthropology, delivered numerous talks on the subject worldwide, and published prominent books that include "Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film and the Exploration of Social Life" (GRIMSHAW & RAVETZ, 2009), "Visualizing Anthropology: Experiments in Image-Based Practice" (GRIMSHAW & RAVETZ, 2005), and "The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology" (GRIMSHAW, 2001). She is also an accomplished filmmaker, with her work having been exhibited in festivals and universities all around Europe and North America, and distributed by such important institutions as Berkeley Media and The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. As for me, I am a graduate student at the University of Brasília's Department of Anthropology. I have been editing films since 2008, and my filmography is comprised mostly of documentaries and anthropological films, including two first-place winners of the prestigious Pierre Verger Prize, awarded every other year by the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA). I was also among the founding members of the Laboratory of Image and Recording of Social Interactions at the University of Brasília (IRIS-DAN/UnB), having supervised technical and creative aspects of several audiovisual projects by researchers and students in the department starting in late 2010 up until early 2018. My journey as an educator began in 2012 and has — thus far — included the delivery of theoretical and practical filmmaking courses, masterclasses, and workshops in several cities and villages across Brazil, France, and Morocco, as well as in El Porvenir (Honduras), Malé (Maldives), and Peshawar (Pakistan).

The conversation reproduced below took place in the afternoon of November 29, 2018, and was the first of fourteen semi-structured interviews I conducted especially for my master's dissertation. The transcript you are about to read is in the language in which the interview was originally conducted in order to respect the nuances of the discourse — which is why I chose to write this piece in English in

the first place — and had its content edited only to the extent that I considered essential to do so. In the interest of total transparency, here is my editing disclaimer: to value the clarity of reading while trying to preserve the texture and general tone of our respective speeches, two classes of operation were performed: first, grammatical adjustments were made and, as part of that process, utterances considered uncomfortable to the reader and also not particularly expressive — such as repetitions, babbling, and certain tics of oral expression — were adapted or removed. Statements considered particularly expressive were kept in their original forms. The second operation was the complete removal of the excerpts in which the conversation takes on a purely phatic function — testing the Skype signal, for example — or in which it addresses topics considered non-essential to the reader, such as greetings, thanks, and exchanges of information about possibly arranging contacts with other people.

I hope you enjoy reading this conversation as much as I enjoyed taking part in it.

I wanted first to ask you to talk a little bit about your relationship with film, with cinema: how you got started with this, if you have any formal training, and just kind of your history with film as you got involved with it.

AG | During the time I was writing up and completing my PhD, I got a job at Granada Television in Manchester. And so, that was really my first engagement with media. It didn't mean I was making films: I was working on other people's films as one does in a context of television production. But I found it interesting, as an anthropologist, to be in the world of media and how it's made and the different roles that people take. But it wasn't really until ten years after that early experience with Granada Television that I more formally got involved with film, and that followed from my appointment to the Granada Center for Visual Anthropology in Manchester in the early nineties. And with that appointment there came a year-long training at the National Film and Television School. So that's what I did, and I learnt there to shoot, take sound, edit. And at that time the film school was directed by Colin Young and the head of the documentary school was Herb Di Gioia, both of whom had a long experience of working with anthropologists. David MacDougall had been a contemporary of Herb Di Gioia's at UCLA in the late sixties, so that I found it very easy to sort of reorient myself to working as an anthropologist with film thanks to them because they taught –or they fostered– a sort of training model that was completely consistent with the kind of approach that I had wanted to pursue as an anthropologist. So, that's where I formally learned the craft. But much of it, you know, is based on just practice itself. I originally trained on 16mm like everybody else in the early nineties, and then began working in that horrible videotape era of the nineties and recognising –although videotape is not a very nice medium to

work with– it did make for more open-ended projects, which of course is what anthropologists prefer.

I wanted to narrow the question down to editing. How was your relationship with editing from the beginning, when you learnt it, and then as you started to practice it?

AG | I learnt editing at the film school because there, as I mentioned, the model was, as far as possible, the single-person filmmaker or, in the case of 16mm, it often involved two people: one is a sound person. But one of the things I learnt very quickly about editing was that a lot of it is an intuitive process. I remember putting together one of my first edits, which was according to what I thought I wanted to communicate about the subject matter, and Herb Di Gioia came and looked at it and basically told me to completely undo it and actually work with what the material was suggesting. So that was a really important lesson for me: to be open to what is being proposed by the material. Obviously, what's being proposed by the material is something I myself as a filmmaker had chosen to shoot, but you can very easily, I think, get caught up in trying to direct the footage in editing, trying to communicate something very concrete and that you already have in mind. And editing actually allows you to let go of that and pursue a more exploratory approach to what the material is suggesting and to discover things in the material that you hadn't necessarily been conscious of when you were shooting. That's one of those... I think it's a craft that is very hard to... I've certainly found it in my teaching. It's a craft that you learn by doing and that requires a lot of patience and nuance and fundamentally a willingness to say "I don't quite know what this work is going to be until I start trying to craft it through editing".

And what do you think constitutes "listening to what the material suggests"? How does that actually work? Can you elaborate on that, perhaps with an example?

AG | It means... I think when we're writing academic anthropology, we're always thinking of an argument. And we know largely how an argument needs to be structured, so we assemble things according to that particular narrative. If you approach film editing as this sort of more open, exploratory practice, it means choosing materials that seem to be suggestive without being sure quite how they're going to fit or shape a narrative. Trying different assemblies out, moving materials around so that through the juxtapositions you can figure out what's going to work or not. It also means a lot of attention to rhythm, to movement, to the ways... I mean, as an observational filmmaker, my work is built from scenes rather than from shots. So, then it's a question of thinking about how to construct a scene. And then, obviously, where that scene needs to go. I mean, in the beginning, one usually puts it in the obvious place, but then through

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juxtaposing materials you often realize "no, it needs to go in a completely differ-ent place". So it's really about turning over the material. It's about trying things out and seeing what emerges — as they say — from juxtapositions. And, as I say, being sensitive to the movement of a film, because a film works when you get its rhythm right. And that means being sensitive to different temporalities. If a film is all of one pace, it's not interesting, or certainly not interesting to me. So that's also something I'm really thinking about. And yeah, in many ways I follow MacDougall's idea that film is a series of propositions and one has to keep it relatively open as a series of questions about the world rather than, say, closing it down and making a film that has a clear message. I don't know if that really answers your question but if I think about the last film I edited, it's very hard for me now to reconstruct the chronology of the footage. But I do know that, although the final version appears to be chronological, the footage itself is in a very different order from the order in which I shot it. So, those decisions to move things around came as a result of immersing myself in the footage and thinking about what was coming out about my subjects and then how to sort of structure that in a way that makes sense to the audience and keeps the audience engaged in trying to find something out.

And what do you think makes an editor? What do you think are the abilities or the skills that a person should have to be an editor?

AG | They have to not want to impose their will on the material. I mean, of course, one loves to have editors with all sorts of technical skills, too, but — you know — Dai Vaughan, I think, universally was loved as an editor of anthropological work and David MacDougall certainly worked with him –as did others– because I think that an editor has to be open to the material, to have their ideas changed about what the possibilities are in the film and to not wish to impose and to be willing to try out a range of different possibilities before committing oneself to a particular kind of narrative. So being open to the interpretive possibilities.

And how does one make the decision, for example, to go with one form of narrative instead of another?

AG | Again, that's difficult. I mean, it depends on the subject and on the subject matter in the context that, in a sense... I think the problem is if you don't follow an established narrative... As you know, many films are either built around an argument –giving us information about an issue or a particular area of the world or a particular set of cultural practices– or a film is based around crisis and event: a ritual, a struggle against something. And so, if you give up both of those things —which is what observational filmmakers did— then, you have to find your own narrative. I mean, it's one of the important breakthroughs of "To

Live With Herds" [MACDOUGALL 1974], for example, in that MacDougall does give up the usual narratives that structure films and then creates this really kind of interesting five-part work. So, I think if you work as an observational filmmaker that is your big challenge: to create a narrative that makes sense without falling back on these rather predictable conventional narratives.

You're talking about conventional thinking. When you're making a film, you have priorities coming from everywhere. You have priorities when you think of your audiences and when you think about the material, the qualities that the material has. And I wanted to get a sense of how you balance these priorities and with a special focus on anthropology. Do you feel like anthropology brings priorities of its own to the editing of films?

AG | Well, I think working as an anthropologist can mean many, many different things. So, I feel that in my work the anthropology is inherent in whatever I do. It's not an add-on. So how I work with my subjects –the ones I'm working with in Maine– I think of as reflecting an anthropological perspective. I know I'm interested in a long term relationship, I'm interested in the ways they make their worlds materially, socially, imaginatively. And those obviously are the aspects that I try to bring out in the work rather than stating clearly "this is a film about something". But that's risky. And so I do have to think about how to persuade an audience to engage with a film that might not declare itself in the terms that they might expect. I think that has been a challenge for observational filmmakers that the films are understated, they are not doing what one often expects either anthropology or film to do. Again, MacDougall's "To Live With Herds" is a good example. It's not conforming in any way. So, often when I've shown it to students, they're puzzled. They don't quite know what to do with it. And so, I think a lot –as all filmmakers do– about how to position one's audience at the beginning of a film so that they can engage with it productively rather be frustrated and baffled by it. And we all have different ways of trying to help our audience into a film. It doesn't always work, of course, but you have to alert your audience at the beginning to how you want them to engage with it. So, I have occasionally used a short piece of poetry at the beginning of my films, which I always hope alerts the viewer to the fact that this isn't a straightforward, literal document, that I'm alerting them to some of the poetic nuances of what I'm filming and asking them to think about that in other ways. I take a lot of time to introduce characters and their situation. And so, the pace of the film is the kind of way I ask the viewer to sort of shift into a different mode. And again, that can be difficult. A student has said to me before now that the challenge for him with ethnographic films was not the subject matter, but the temporal dimensions. He found it very difficult to adjust to a different sense of time. And

so, I use that often at the beginning of my films to try and persuade viewers to be patient, to expect things to unfold slowly and not in a kind of very directive way. And it's something I think all filmmakers think about a lot if they're not following the usual conventions, which audiences then know what to do with.

You talked on an interview that you gave to EthnoFest [GRIMSHAW 2016] –and here as well– about how you enjoy the fact that you're making a film that you don't quite know what will be. So I wanted you to elaborate a little bit on this uncertainty of the film that's going to come out of the work that you do as an editor and how you deal with all of these forces that we've been talking about when you're editing, but with a focus on this uncertainty.

AG | Well, I think of editing as continuous with shooting. I mean, a lot of people think that it is the editing that makes a film. In some cases, that's what happens. Somebody shoots the film and hands it over to an editor and the editor turns it into something for an audience. I think that, if you work as a single-person filmmaker and you work observationally, you are already doing analytical work whilst you're shooting, you're already making decisions — conscious and unconscious — about what to film, how to film it, how to think of the development of events and relationships around the camera. And so, editing then becomes a way of clarifying those insights and discovering new ones. It's not about bringing a different perspective to bear or bringing a kind of external framework to bear on raw material or data. It's about continuing the analytical work that was begun in filming. And it's a kind of journey that unfolds. I mean, obviously one always has a starting point –a subject or a situation that one is interested in exploring — and then following where that may take you and being open to it taking you in directions that you might not have imagined. And then trying to reflect some of that journey in the editing itself, using editing to mine a process of thought that's built into the materials at the time of shooting.

You mentioned earlier that one of the things that you can do during editing is letting go of –I wouldn't say thinking, but something of the sort: you can relax your guard a little bit to wait for the material to suggest things. And you said now that there's a process of thinking during the editing. And just to add to this, I was talking to another filmmaker who told me that his creative process was wholly intuitive except for the editing. So, he would eschew editing as much as possible because he couldn't do editing without thinking too much. I wanted just to get a sense of this. It doesn't sound like a conflict, but it sounds like something that's more complex than only "don't think, let the material speak" or "editing is a process of thought that you should analyze and the analysis continues". So, how would you resolve that or what are your thoughts on that?

AG | Editing is very demanding work. You're immersed and you have to be open to the material, but at the same time, you really have to be thinking about what it is suggesting to you and how you're going to craft an interpretation. And I find editing very demanding in that way. Moving between what feels right and what more cognitively you can acknowledge as working. So it's a very curious — I keep using the word "craft" because it requires skill. It requires a kind of attentiveness to arrange experiential features, but at the same time, it requires thinking and making decisions about what the film is about in the end and relinquishing certain things. And then, crafting the narrative in a way that is comprehensible to somebody who knows nothing about the subject or the situation. So yeah, it's a very difficult task. I don't know if you edit yourself, but it's a difficult task to describe because you really learn how to do it, as I said right at the beginning, by doing it. It's not something that you can kind of teach in any sort of straightforward way.

I've been editing for ten years and, still, it's difficult for me to describe what it is that I know that other people don't. It's kind of the reason why I'm doing this research. So, let me ask you something: you once wrote an article about drawing [GRIMSHAW & RAVETZ 2015]. I'm saying this because you said "the craft" of editing, so let's take another craft as an example. You said that camerawork is like drawing, so I wanted to ask you where the editing fits in the drawing process if you were to expand your argument.

AG | Well, the editing is in the choice of where the line goes. Again, it's not as separate as it is in filmmaking. The line and the shape are all integrated. With drawing, you decide where to stop — just as with the film, in a way, you decide where to stop —, and in stopping there is already a shape there. It's not necessarily something that you can bring in from the outside. You have to work with the shape and the line that you've made on the paper. That's, I think, how I would try to explain it.

You've been saying that it's one whole process, the filming and the editing. So, I wanted to ask you: why do you think people break them down into two different tasks?

AG | Well, there are certainly reasons, within the industry, why that has happened. But in terms of anthropology, I think it comes from this idea that film is footage and that it has to be turned into anthropology through the process of editing just as field notes and other kinds of documents and artefacts are then sort of turned into anthropology through writing and other processes of transformation. I think that is how it's often seen in anthropology: that filming is this two-stage process that you go out into the field and you document things and then you later sort of turn them into a film by bringing to bear some kind of anthropological perspective on those kinds of raw materials. But, as we know,

it's much more complicated than that. And it's important to not have this sepa-
ration. I mean, there is no such thing as a raw material in anthropology. There's
has already been a process of selection. And so, why not recognise that there
is this kind of ongoing interpretive action on the part of the anthropologist in
which the two things can't be separated?

**I'm very interested in something you said. You said "turning footage into anthro-
pology"; not into film, but into anthropology. I wanted to ask you to elaborate a
little bit more on that.**

AG | Well, as you know, most anthropologists don't easily recognize film as anthro-
pology. They think of it as film about some kind of anthropology that it's not
anthropological in its own right. I mean, it's not its own form of anthropolog-
ical inquiry. As we know, Margaret Mead is the most notorious example that
anthropologists — well, everybody — goes to the field with a camera. They
create these artefacts and documents, and to put them together in a way that
is meaningful means bringing anthropology to bear on them, to assemble
them in accordance with some anthropological framework. That seems just
very problematic to me, in that it involves overlooking the distinctive kind of
anthropology that can be done through film. It means appropriating film to the
established frameworks, largely textually-based frameworks of anthropology.

**And what is the place of theory in anthropological filmmaking? What do you think
theory can add to or change in the debate?**

AG | Nothing! Nothing. I'm totally against theory. As you know, there has been a lot
of discussion about whether the problem with ethnographic films' status in
anthropology is that it isn't as theoretical. But I have no patience with theory. I
mean, I'm really an Ingoldian in which I think of anthropology as a generative
practice that can't be enclosed by theoretical frameworks. I think theory is the
death of film; film throws up ways of thinking about the world that are always
at odds with our existing frameworks and that's what we should embrace about
film. That it challenges our ways, the ways that we might want to enclose the
world in particular kinds of theoretical paradigms.

Can you kind of walk me through an editing session of yours?

AG | As you probably know what I mean, editing is kind of a full-time occupation. So,
I don't start editing it until I know I can commit myself to it full time for several
weeks because you have to live in the footage, you can't constantly be moving
out of it into something else. When I'm teaching and involved in other things, I
do not edit. I need to completely clear my head to live in the film and to live with
the characters of the film. So, that's the sort of fundamental. And then what I

do is I assemble sections that I like, even if I don't have a reason for it, sections that seem to me to be important. Again, even if I don't really have a clear reason why a particular scene seemed to be significant. And so I create these sort of little assemblies and then you try putting them together, and moving them around, and dropping things, and bringing new things in. That's how it works for me. And that's often how I encourage my students to think about editing. Don't worry about having something in mind or feeling that you know where you're going. Just work with small parts of what you have and think about them, and begin with those that are easiest, which are the ones that seem to suggest things very clearly. But, very quickly, from those sorts of footholds, you begin to have a kind of basis for exploring other things, considering what you've kind of discounted as not relevant material. So really, it's a kind of process of aggregation, of adding and being open to a very long and unruly first few edits, because the longer the piece is the more you have to think, and the more you can think about. Often there is a temptation to rush to the first narrative that suggests itself and think "well, okay, I've found the film". But that rarely works in the end. I mean, it's a temptation, but again, I say to myself and I say to my students: "well, okay, you've got an edit. Now, do a completely different one, a completely new one". And that process of unscrambling what seems to be an edit that works usually takes one deeper into the materials and into the kinds of questions that it's raising. So that's how I saw it.

I wanted to go back to the beginning when you said you learnt how to edit with 16mm. How do you think technology plays a part in the kind of savoir-faire of the editor? How do you think technology changes the craft of editing?

AG | It does and it doesn't. I think video editing, as I mentioned, in the nineties was sort of the worst because it was linear and that all seemed very clunky and time-consuming. You couldn't do anything very sophisticated, whereas with a splicer and tape it was amazing what you could do in 16mm. I mean, obviously you handled the materials, which is always very satisfying, but you could easily sort of undo something, try something else. There was a great deal of mobility in the editing room, and, to some extent, non-linear editing has brought that back. It's not the same, of course, just clicking a mouse and so on, but I found it's very easy to adapt to what technology offers in terms of really being able to review your work much more easily, to try things out much more easily, to move things around, and all of that seems to be critical to exploring your material if the technology makes that possible. That's good.

And have you ever worked as an editor in someone else's film or have you ever had an external editor working in one of your films?

AG | No. I mean, in working with students I spend a lot of time sort of as an editor or as an editorial eye. And I actually enjoy that a lot because it creates a dialogue and I can help. I mean, I see things in their material, I can help them give up some of their more kind of directive instincts. I haven't had anybody edit my material, but I'm not averse to it. I would be interested to see what an editor would do. I work closely with others. I mean, I share my own work with my students. I share it with one or two other people; Amanda Ravetz who's been my co-author. She and I have shared work, and so it's not as if I'm editing in a vacuum at all. I have rather trusted editorial advisors who I know understand the kind of approach that I'm pursuing. And so I take very seriously comments and criticisms they make as editors and I absolutely depend on editorial feedback.

What do you look for in editorial feedback?

AG | First of all, I have to feel that the comments come from a place of understanding what the film is trying to be. Very often, in all critical context, you can find an interlocutor trying to make the film the way they would like the film to be rather than kind of engaging with what it is. So that's the first thing. And then, obviously, people identify problems in the structure and the timing, irrelevant material. It's got digressions that aren't helpful. So, whenever I get comments on a film of mine, I go absolutely through each one of those. And often, you know, if you have several people looking at a film they will all hone in on the same problems. They may see them in slightly different ways, but it's usually not a kind of totally random set of comments that people agree on where the problems lie. And then that means one has to really address them.

You said before about being able to direct the film, to impose your will on the film, and to hear what the film suggests. And now, regarding editorial commentary, one of the things that you value is that people look at the film as it is, rather than as they think it should be. I wanted to go back to this one point that you've given me about directing with both of these answers. There's a very famous film editor who has said that a good editor should be a humble director. I wanted to get a sense of how are directing and editing mixed together, or how they relate to each other?

AG | Well, I think that's absolutely right. I think that the director has to be humble in the light of what the material is. The director usually, as we know, asserts his or her vision and wants to craft a film according to that. In this kind of practice, what the material suggests might complicate that vision. It might challenge that vision. And that, in many ways, to be willing to work with what the material is suggesting rather than insisting that one's own ideas are the way to go in primarily structuring the material.

Right. But if one imposes one's will they will get a film, eventually. What do you think will be the difference?

AG | I think an editor-driven film will be a more finely crafted work. It will be a more nuanced work. It will be, you know, work that has been shaped by the process of editing, which has sound, image, and movement. That seems to be a much more kind of subtle and nuanced way of crafting something than a more director-oriented approach.

And what do you think anthropology can teach filmmakers? What do you think is the difference with an editor with a substantial background in anthropology? Do you think something changes?

AG | I like to think an anthropologically informed editor would be more patient with the material, would have a kind of longer view, would have a more kind of digressive view of what's possible. That an anthropological editor would be interested in the kind of texture of relationships, of the ways in which people make their worlds. That they would be sensitive to differences between talk and action, or talk and embodied action. That they would, you know, produce a textured film that reflected a kind of long term engagement with the place or with a certain group of people. Above all, this real attentiveness to the relationships between people and between people and their material world, I suppose.

I wanted to give you an open space to say something about editing that we've not covered here, but that you would still want to say. Is there anything?

AG | No, I don't think so. No. I think your questions have been very good. I mean, I'm happy to hear that you're going to be doing something on editing because I think people don't necessarily think very much about it or what's involved. They just assume it sort of happens and it makes something anthropological or it makes something into a real film. And I actually think it is a much more complex process. And again, I think people who are textual anthropologists, when it comes to working with film, they don't really know what to look for or how to kind of critically engage a film's techniques. So they always focus on content, "what's the film about?", rather than being able to sort of evaluate the perspective and the ways in which it's been crafted and put together. And that seems to be essential to understand something of shooting and editing, to be able to critically engage with film as a way of doing anthropology, and to think of it as crafted anthropology. Not as anything that's just a straightforward literal representation of anthropology or a topic in anthropology. So, I'm all for more discussion about the craft. I mean, we've become very used to the craft being talked about in terms of writing and text, but we don't have a broader conversation about the craft that covers a range of different media and I think

that's going to be very helpful in terms of understanding the different ways of knowing that anthropologists can be working with.

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