

## The Making of *Pieces of the Puzzle*: Reflections on a Collaborative Ethnographic Filmmaking Process

*Thomas Scott Hughes, Brady Welch, and Janine Schuurman*

*This is a companion piece to the “Pieces of the Puzzle” film.*

Watch the film here: [https://youtu.be/bP6vpL\\_kDmg](https://youtu.be/bP6vpL_kDmg)

Though many twentieth-century documentary films might be considered anthropological in intent, the fields of documentary filmmaking and anthropology have diverged sharply, with the former embracing the strictures of streaming entertainment, while a significant part of the latter remains committed to academia. Can the two be brought into productive dialogue? We argue they should. Anthropology and film can learn from, share, and benefit one another because both find sustenance in the same deep well of human experience. But when the two disciplines are estranged, powerful human stories too often remain obscured.

The potential of film to communicate important social scientific ideas was indeed a major realization in the making of *Pieces of the Puzzle*. In the process of making the film, we took on the challenge of interrogating a subject of study – “the culture of scientific labs” – first through the lens of the social, and then through the lens of the aesthetic.

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While the process yielded insights into the subject matter, it also revealed a new awareness into the practice of ethnography itself.

This essay, as a companion piece to the film, attempts to take the reader through the collaborative journey of an anthropologist, a scientist, and a filmmaker (the authors) that led to the creation of the film, and what we learned along the way.

### **Film Origin Story: An Anthropologist, a Scientist, and a Filmmaker Walk into a Lab**

The idea for the film grew out of conversations between scientist Janine Schuurman and anthropologist Thomas Scott Hughes about the organizational culture of Genmab, an international biotechnology company. Thomas was in the process of conducting his post-doctoral research in collaboration with the organization and was eager to learn about the research and development side of Genmab.<sup>1</sup> During their conversations about cultural aspects of Genmab, Janine and Thomas became particularly interested in how to authentically capture the culture of the lab, as it plays a crucial, but frequently overlooked, role at the company and many organizations like it.

Their conversations about the behaviors, values, and beliefs of scientists in the lab led the two to read Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's anthropological classic *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979). The text's application of a social lens to the scientific process sparked an ambition to further zero in on the kaleidoscope of human factors that exist in the modern lab. And the thinking was to somehow illustrate this through the medium of film.

Eventually, award-winning documentary filmmaker Brady Welch joined to help conceptualize and lead a process for how we might borrow from the cinematic toolkit to create an engaging and accurate portrayal of life in the lab.

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<sup>1</sup> This post-doctoral anthropological research project set out to understand the development of company culture and the meaning of diversity in the face of rapid organizational growth at Genmab. The ongoing study focuses on the challenges of developing a cohesive company culture, including Genmab's DEI strategy, across increasingly diverse cultural contexts. As a two-year collaboration with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen, the project aims to produce scientifically rich insights based on empirical research which will inform a foundational perspective on which to continuously develop Genmab's company culture and a bespoke and differentiated DEI strategy, as well as high-impact academic publications in the field of organizational anthropology.

## **Filmmaking as Method**

It was an explorative process, informed by Janine's expertise and extensive experience in the lab, Thomas' post-doctoral research on the organization, and Brady's sharp eye for story and character. The end result is a commentary on science that lands, we think, somewhere between ethnography and documentary.

### *Selecting "Characters"*

Brady and Thomas began by conducting a series of informal conversations with current and former lab workers, selected through defined criteria.<sup>2</sup> Brady would refer to this process as casting, while Thomas might call it an ethnographic sprint with semi-structured interviews. Each, therefore, had a different set of benchmarks for what was most interesting or beneficial to the final project. Naturally perhaps, Brady's interest was more in character and story, while Thomas viewed the process through an ethnographic lens and the larger philosophy of science. What we learned, however, was that such distinctions are largely semantic or academic, and our inclinations overwhelmingly dovetailed. Ultimately, the collaborative process – amongst Brady and Thomas, but also amongst all the scientists who were interviewed – both shaped and revealed the themes we explored in the final film,<sup>3</sup> the visual aesthetic (for instance, displaying the subjects on a bare white background), and, of course, the final cast itself.

### *The Explorative and Experimental Process Mirrored the Subject Matter*

When we set off on this project, we could clearly see how it would begin, but none of us knew where it might end up. We had, of course, our hypotheses, but much like the scientists revealed to us about their own work, we both risked failure and sought the opportunity to discover something entirely new. Critically, we did not know how the scientists would react in front of the cameras and under bright lights (speaking about one's work to strangers in a conference room feels vastly different than on a film set). It was essential for our intentions that the interviews be unscripted, and, therefore, all of the footage is spontaneous and

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<sup>2</sup> We selected interview subjects based on three criteria: representation of organizational area (that is, lab workers from across the organization), diversity of viewpoint on the topics of interests, and diversity of profile (age, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and career stage).

<sup>3</sup> Brady and Thomas developed an interview guide to be used for the filmed interviews, to ensure that the important thematic areas uncovered in the "pre-interviews" were covered with each subject. This also allowed for continuity and coherence in the resulting "meta-narrative" of the film, where responses were edited together to craft one story.

authentic, relative to a filmic context. And we knew that no matter what we discovered, we would learn something. Fittingly, this stands as an apt metaphor for the scientific process we aimed to document: a puzzle composed of many distinct pieces that ladders up to a larger whole – in this case, a narrative about scientific discovery and the people dedicated to it.

### **The Power of the Aesthetic in Rendering the Social**

What we learned while making the film was that turning an artistic lens on important themes in the social science of science (such as the importance of the collective) can make these concepts more emotionally resonant and immediate. Themes in Thomas' post-doctoral work around the behaviors, drivers, values, and beliefs of the scientists were communicated through the film in a more unique and resonant way than any single journal article. Witness the scientists' joyful expressions when discussing the power of discovery! While anthropology can illustrate the broad human contours of science, art can give that humanity a uniquely penetrating voice.

We believe – and hope – that *Pieces of the Puzzle* powerfully communicates the motivations of these scientists and the intrinsic beauty of their culture to the Genmab organization and beyond. While the film is now publicly available on YouTube, it first premiered internally at Genmab where the reaction was overwhelmingly positive and, somewhat surprisingly, deeply emotional. Many employees expressed how the film touched them profoundly, especially the film stars themselves. The film succeeded not only in demonstrating appreciation to lab employees, but also in communicating their passion, perseverance, and unique culture to people who have never entered a lab. It validated the scientists' work on a human level, and they felt "seen" in a way they never had before – and all of this while investigating important anthropological themes. For us, then, it was a win-win.

While we initially set out to develop a "love letter" to Genmab's lab workers, we ended up creating a tribute to scientists and the scientific process everywhere that was relatable to a much larger audience within Genmab and beyond.

### **More Anthropological Collaborations with Artists in Organizations**

We encourage more collaboration between organizations, anthropologists, and artists. Consider how creative mediums like film could be used to communicate insights informed by, but wholly distinct from the familiar anthropological gaze. Such media can help anthropologists tell more powerful stories about the contexts they study and the insights they uncover in organizations. Even the process of

engaging with artists can lead to unique forms of collaboration with respondents, yielding unexpected insights. Ultimately, we believe that the creative arts can and should be utilized to help anthropologists communicate the power of the discipline to stakeholders in the organizations they study as well as to the public at large.

**Thomas Scott Hughes** is a PhD anthropologist with a deep passion for high-impact research. As an applied researcher, Thomas has developed actionable human-centered insights and strategies for a wide range of private companies, governments, academic institutions, and NGOs. Thomas is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, leading a collaborative research project with Genmab (an international biotechnology company) that explores organizational culture, growth, and the power of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

**Brady Welch** is an award-winning creative director working in advertising, documentary, and journalism. His collaborations with Vice News won two Emmy Awards, while a short film made for the *New Yorker* garnered a SXSW Special Jury Prize. His other projects have won numerous Vimeo Staff Picks. An avid cyclist, surfer, and mushroom hunter, he currently splits his time between New York and Mexico City.

**Janine Schuurman** (PhD) serves as Senior Vice President Antibody Research and Technology at Genmab. Throughout her whole career, she has been inspired by the beauty of the immune system and how the antibody molecule interacts within the immune system. She followed her passion to develop innovative antibody therapeutics and joined Genmab in its early days, in 2000. The impact of organisational culture and leadership on innovative organisations always got her attention. She is a co-inventor of many antibody therapeutic products and platform technologies, active in the scientific antibody biology and therapeutics community, a renowned speaker at scientific conferences, and an experienced conference organiser and session chair.