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# Videographic geographies: Using digital video for geographic research

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**Abstract**

This article is a review of the ways in which human geography has engaged with film and video. Beginning with a look at the history of cinematic analysis within the discipline, the paper outlines different possible uses for digital video, focusing on its merits as a multisensory ethnographic method. The article encourages geographers to make the move from analysis to production, citing examples from successful recent projects which have done so, endorsing further integration of video into fieldwork and an increase in digital publication to create what we might call videographic geographies.

**Keywords**

cultural geography, digital video, ethnography, film, participatory video, reflexivity, visual methods

**I Introduction**

In this paper, I make three arguments. Beginning by outlining the types of filmic engagement that have taken place within geography in the last 100 years, I contend that while geography as a discipline has seen the potential in film analysis and critique to enhance cultural understanding, and has produced some notable ‘landscape’ films, the discipline has yet to realize the full potential of video as a research methodology. Following this, the second argument I will make is that digital video is distinctly useful to human geography as a research tool; it is a method capable of producing rich, thick cultural documents (Geertz, 1973) that are particularly valuable to ethnographic research. The third argument I make is that videographic research methods are an important component of contemporary fieldwork where we want to record experiences and thoughts to share with project participants and potential viewers.

The final section of the paper intertwines these three arguments: I argue that geography as a discipline would benefit greatly from expanding the researcher’s toolset to include the consistent use of digital video, especially in ethnographic contexts. I build this final argument on the line of reasoning that video is capable of offering an alternative form of representation, something inherently different in terms of both production and consumption from text, photographs, performance, aural media, etc. (Witmore, 2005). The process of making video as part of our research process is, I argue in the end, both of scholarly value and useful for expanding interest in geographic research to wider audiences. I will supplement these points in the discussion by

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taking a look at some recent social science projects using video as method to open discussion on future possibilities for what we might call 'videographic geographies'.

Geography's relationship with the visual is something that has been written about at great length in other places (to begin, see Driver, 2003; Rogoff, 2000; Rose, 2003) and through one turn or another, despite apparent fears of ocular-centrism (Macpherson, 2005), photography has become an accepted, if not yet celebrated, geographic method. Photography is now practiced in numerous forms including photography as experiential record, participant portrait photography, architectural photography, archival analysis and photo elicitation, with geographers showing little reluctance to *become* photographers in the course of work on their projects. But even 'visual geographers' seem to harbour some reservations about photography's ability to be singularly situated as a method, usually viewing it as supplementary to text.

Rose, perhaps the most well-known visual geographer, has written that even if we choose to use visual methods in our work, text must be our primary medium (Rose, 2001: 250). This argument has also been made by anthropologists who see text as necessary to 'elucidate' videographic production (Fuchs, 1988: 223; Hastrup, 1992; Heider, 1976: 127). Visual anthropologist Sarah Pink, on the other hand, argues that 'while images should not necessarily replace words as the dominant mode of research or representation, they should be regarded as an equally meaningful element of ethnographic work' (Pink, 2007: 4–5). The fact that these discussions are taking place at all is promising and may point to the fact that geographers seem to be increasingly interested in uses for photography. Yet video remains, strangely, drastically underutilized, spurned as a method of publication and dissemination in many instances.

Perhaps this reluctance stems from perceived technical barriers, or from researchers being frustrated with the movement of video, a 'stream

of temporality where nothing can be kept, nothing stopped' (Metz, 1985: 83). It might of course be argued that video is a useful geographic research tool *because* it captures movement; video tracks the multisensual fluidity and rhythms of everyday life, events that researchers have been involved in trying to understand recently (Hindmarsh et al., 2010; Laurier and Philo, 2002). Video is capable of recording an experiential stream of time in the field as a researcher, in the world as a participant, in the flux and flow of passage and encounter on a sliding range of scale, time and space. Raw fieldwork footage serves as an excellent record keeper and a well-considered, well-shot, well-edited video becomes a multifaceted web of thought, memory, materiality and movement; a place-making process (Pink, 2008) 'situated in the interstices between the collage of material articulations that encompass our everyday lives and ourselves' (Witmore, 2005: 58).

Early on, anthropology, in contrast to geography, saw the benefits of film in the widely watched production of *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922),<sup>1</sup> with the first ethnographic film produced in 1898 (El Guindi, 2004: 1)! This development is interesting given the fact that one of the first major geographic expeditions, the Everest ascent in 1922, was filmed by J.B. Noel, the same year as the release of *Nanook of the North*. Why did visual anthropology flourish where visual geography stagnated, despite their similar timelines, goals and ethical quandaries (Prosser, 2005)?<sup>2</sup> It is not a question that can be definitively answered here, but perhaps in tracing some of anthropology's filmic roots some insights may be revealed.

As exemplified by the debates surrounding *Nanook of the North* (Rony, 1996), anthropology went through growing pains with video. Loizos (1992: 52) writes that 'the still camera and tape recorder were granted rapid, and virtually unquestioned acceptance by most anthropologists for their basic 'recording' capabilities ... But film has had a much slower and cautious

acceptance'. We can see reflections of this reluctance in geography today, to the point that, as mentioned earlier, even the camera as a recording device is treated with suspicion, as if it has some sort of metaphysical corrupting influence due to its 'visuality'. Perhaps what is required in order to subvert this tainted perception is an explanation of what video may be capable of in the hands of a competent researcher.

In the section that follows, I begin by discussing the different ways and different levels in which we might engage with film and video, both as a product and as a potential tool.

## II Flavours of film and video work

Film and video has been engaged with academically in a number of different ways, which could be broken into five categories:

- Writing about films (analysis)
- Production for an audience (popular geography films)
- Footage as record (data collection)
- Reflexive filmmaking (experiential filmmaking)
- Participatory video (collaborative filmmaking)

These five categories of film and video production serve vastly different purposes, and while geographers have been particularly active in film analysis, have produced a few excellent popular films (though usually poorly distributed) and have done notable work using participatory video techniques, few researchers use film for data collection and almost none are involved in experiential filmmaking. After taking a look at how these film forms have been utilized, I will make useful comparisons to work done in anthropology to discuss the different ways in which anthropologists have used video to somewhat different ends and make suggestions about what we might learn from that parallel development.

### I Writing about films

In 1974, Martin A. Jackson made an argument that:

film needs to be considered as one of the repositories of twentieth century consciousness in that it reflects much of the awareness of the men and women who make it. Just as the painting, literature, and plastic art, so too may film serve as an avenue of perception into the thought and feeling of the mid-twentieth century. (Jackson, 1974: 223–224)

This sentiment was echoed in 1994 by Aitken and Zonn who encourage geographers to recognize the 'interrelations between film and the politics of social and cultural representation' (Aitken and Zonn, 1994b: Preface), more recently in this journal by Kennedy and Lukinbeal (1997) who suggest a holistic approach toward geographic research of films, and again by Aitken and Dixon (2006) when they proclaimed that 'the study of film within the discipline of geography has now come of age'.

Geographers, by and large, rose to these calls – a scan of geographic film studies reveals a wide range of films treated as cultural documents which have been unpacked to reveal myriad stratigraphies of human thought, cultural consciousness and geographic imaginations. *The Outsiders* has been dissected to discuss community formation (Wood, 1994), *The Crying Game* analyzed to consider issues of gender identity (Dahlman, 2002) and the Native American film *Smoke Signals* has been looked at in terms of indigenous identity formation and stereotypes (Zonn and Winchell, 2002). The classic *Lawrence of Arabia* has been mined to form assumptions about masculinist heroic myth making (Kennedy, 1994) and Edensor (1997) has written about *Braveheart* and its role in perceptions of Scottish national identity. More recently, Curti (2008) has even written a piece about Deleuzian philosophy in the animated Japanese science fiction film *Ghost in the Shell*.

From a slightly different perspective, Natter (1994) has discussed the role of cinema in Berlin on the formation of place-making, Davies (2003) has written of networks in natural-history filmmaking, Gandy about landscapes in Italy (Gandy, 2003) and Bowden (1994) about class issues in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. Aitken and Zonn (1994a) use *Australia's Storm Boy* to talk about symbolic landscapes, Dodds (2006) discusses the geopolitics of James Bond, and Laurel Smith (2002) discusses *Nanook of the North* from a geographic perspective to reveal new thoughts about mobility and identity in the film that seems to have slipped past anthropologists' view.

Mike Crang, in his book *Cultural Geographies*, points out that 'literature is ... just one creative "media" through which cultural ideas are produced and reproduced' (Crang, 1998: 81), highlighting the need for work beyond the written word. It is obvious from the extensive nature of this list that geographers are open to filmic engagement. Perhaps Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006) are right to now proclaim 'film geography' a new subfield. Given that, combined with the increasing use of photography in our work, the next obvious questions are these: how do we begin to move from cinematic analysis to videographic utilization? What new ideas manifest when geographers *become* filmmakers?

## 2 Production for an audience

Part of the problem with video gaining prominence as a recognized method for research and presentation can be attributed to the reluctance of journal editors to 'go digital' with peer-reviewed publications which would encourage video production as a form of publication. There are three notable exceptions. The first is the journal *Surveillance and Society*, which produced an article with a linked video first in 2003 (Schienke and Brown, 2003)<sup>3</sup> and has continued to produce work which has increasingly offered distinction to videographic publication (see

Knoetze and Mestre, 2009, for a recent example).<sup>4</sup> The second is the journal *Liminalities* which has encouraged the integration of videos into their website in a way which melds the two forms quite nicely (Dickens, 2008; Hansen, 2008). Finally, *Geography Compass* has taken it a step further by commissioning two 'video articles' in the last two years which raises the question of what a 'video article' might look like as a stand-alone enterprise (Evans and Jones, 2008; Garrett, 2010b).

Part of this dissemination problem rests with academic institutions, including the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the United Kingdom on which careers hinge (Elton, 2000), who choose not to qualify films, exhibits, performances and similar work which offer alternative forms of representation as 'publications' (though this may soon be changing). Other problems exist due to copyright, liability, technical limitations and difficulty over distribution and control, but these problems were issues with other media at one time as well, suggesting something else may be at work here.

Clearly, this problem is not just limited to academic bureaucracy; part of the discouragement of using video in research projects stems from the fact that geographers themselves have labelled the use of video as 'highly specialized and technically demanding' (Rose, 2001: 238). This idea has been reinforced by recent projects which turn geographic filmmaking into major productions. Matthew Gandy's film *Liquid City* included participation from around seven people, leading him to conclude that a project of this kind 'requires a larger and more diverse team of people than is common for most academic projects' (Gandy, 2009: 407). Patrick Keiller, when filming *The Dilapidated Dwelling*, opted to use a 35 mm camera that was very expensive to operate and process and, although Keiller himself is a filmmaker, an analysis of the production of his film was published in *Cultural Geographies* (Keiller, 2009) and he has collaborated with geographers on a number of his films.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these projects leave one with a sense that large funding bodies and expensive equipment are necessary to produce geographic films, despite the fact that anthropology has been steadily producing high-quality films on shoestring budgets for many years, often planned, shot and edited by a single person (for two great examples of what is possible, see Chaud, 2008,<sup>6</sup> and Yorke, 2005). Beyond just being possible, there are benefits to filming in this way. A single-person shoot involves far less negotiation in production, editing and distribution and is actually very similar to writing an article. Like a multi-authored paper, too many collaborators can make any project unwieldy, regardless of the medium used!

Though it may have been the case 10 years ago, digital video today is inexpensive and extremely easy to manipulate, especially in tapeless digital video cameras that record onto flash disks and hard drives allowing for 'drag and drop' video production where little or no editing is required (El Guindi, 2004). In a three-year participatory video project, Sandercock and Attili (2010: 24) found that their work was 'immensely helped by recent advances in camera and editing software, and related reductions in film-making costs'. A digital video camera today is no more difficult to wield than a digital still camera, and in many cases one piece of equipment does a fairly good job of both. The anthropology blog *Savage Minds* (Golub, 2009) recently wrote about the fact that the iPod Nano (or an iPhone for that matter) can be utilized as an all-in-one device for fieldwork in many contexts, serving as a camera, video camera, notebook and voice recorder. This work, in a complementary context, can be produced for mobile media devices or web output to great effect, as the Open University has shown with their excellent collection of audio and video podcasts on issues ranging from cultural heritage to biodiversity.<sup>7</sup>

New geography projects using digital video effectively as a method of dissemination, such

as Hansen's work on walking in New York City (Hansen, 2008) and the previously mentioned piece by Schienke and Brown (2003), are repeatedly pushed to the margins of geographic publication and required to have accompanying text to elucidate and describe the video footage, leading to a case where 'when visual ways of researching are used, data is still predominately presented as text' (Brown et al., 2008: 1.4). In other cases, fantastic video projects are written about in academic journals with no mention of the film that informed, and perhaps provoked, the production of the text (Gandy, 2008), or where the film seems to serve as a motivation to generate text (Tapsell et al., 2001), relegating the video, which in many of these cases conducts meaning extremely effectively, affectively, accessibly and vividly, to the role of a data mine for interview quotes in a paper.

This sort of work is reminiscent of the positivist goals stated by visual anthropologists Barbash and Taylor (1997) who have argued that video footage should be collected as 'raw material' of scientific documentation, being treated as an audiovisual record that can be replayed to gather direct quotes, all footage to be logged and transcribed, transmuted into text. Although I think digital video is capable of being used in multiple ways besides this, especially in light of the previously mentioned proliferation of inexpensive digital hardware, video as field record is one useful method, to which I will now turn.

### 3 Footage as record

Video can be used for simple recording of events, serving as important field documentation. Keeping footage as record has its merits, treated like field notes, useful to refer to and in many cases not to be made public. Researchers working in anthropology, visual culture, media ethnography and visual studies have been using film as a field recording method widely since the 1960s (Loizos, 1993: 11).



As Sarah Pink argues convincingly, there is some case to be made for obtaining as many forms of record as possible, as she did on a recent walking tour of a Cittàslow town, collecting 'multi-sensorial and multi-modal experience ... represented with different intensity in different media' (Pink, 2008: 190). One argument for the use of video in these cases might be the potential for sharing your work with participants who may have interest in recordings for their own personal archives. Footage held in the researcher's archive can be grazed for virtual artifacts and visual heritage, long after the production is complete, by either yourself or your project participants (Omori, 1988).

Many times, video footage serves as an (often unintentional) record of a particular time and place, preserving visually, aurally and sensually what will inevitably change, such as footage from inside the New York World Trade Center while the towers still stood or of London's Borough of Hackney prior to the 2012 Olympic Park construction (Garrett et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2009).<sup>8</sup> But what is captured need not necessarily be on such a large scale to be useful. Video can also capture small gestures, expressions and moments which remind us of something intangible, something that may have slipped from memory otherwise.

Video footage can, in some instances, replace written records where the primary goal was to record non-verbal communication such as subtle eye movements and body language (Laurier and Brown, 2009). Alasuutari writes that 'to record non-verbal communication one needs a movie or video camera, and in a group discussion situation there should probably be several of them' (Alasuutari, 1995: 43). The multiple gazes of multiple cameras might capture what your eyes did not, especially if you were staring at a notebook. In this way, the camera brings you into the centre of the action. You and your project participants become more aware of your role and involvement when the camera is rolling, rendering your ethnographic presence increasingly

transparent. Video may also, alternately, allow us to become more invisible.

Lefebvre suggests an elevated window to take photographs in order to analyze human rhythm in place (Hansen, 2008: 2). Heath and Hindmarsh (2002) suggest this as an ideal viewpoint for recording groups of people in public spaces and the ways in which they interact. This technique can be exploited further with video where time and space can be collapsed in the editing process. Hours become seconds; days become minutes (for some wonderful examples of what is possible with filmic time compression, see Fricke, 1985, 1992; Reggio, 1982, 1988, 2002). Flows and rhythms begin to emerge with the virtually increased or decreased passage of time on video.

Although these arguments may be perceived as quite celebratory, I am not suggesting that video representations should replace textual representations as a 'dominant' form of media, but that 'visual materials' should be analyzed and shared in relation to other research texts with equal weight and criticism (Pink, 2007: 113) in order to deepen our understanding of experience and portrayal. This line of reasoning is bolstered by Eric Laurier who argues that 'for the social sciences, indirect reports or statistical summaries on [for instance] housing conditions lack the force of being witness to photographs [or] videos' (Laurier, 2009: 17). In these instances, even those who tend to practice more empirically based geographies may find video can be a useful research tool.

Early anthropologists worked with film as if it was capable of recording an objective life-stream. The anthropologist Margaret Mead, in the 1970s, argued that cameras left to film continuously without human intervention produced 'objective material' (Mead, 1995: 9–10) of cultural depiction. Debates in the 1970s and 1980s around ethnographic film were centered on the possibility of 'scientific' objectivity through filming (Banks, 1992; Heider, 1976). Later, it was thought that *cinéma vérité* style video would come closer to objective truth by filming days in the lives of

informants almost non-stop, avoiding attractions to cultural spectacles (Debord, 1994). Still later, 'observational cinema grew out of *cinéma vérité* ... characterised by long takes (some of several minutes), sync-sound, and for the first time a frank admission that the film crew was indeed there, talking to people, sometimes even getting in the shot' (Hockings, 1995: vi).

All of these styles are useful in different situations, but the admission that the presence of the researcher and the gaze of the camera will ultimately influence behaviour is, I think, an essential one (Laurier and Philo, 2006). Ethnographic filmmakers who seek to create film as an objective record of 'whole' culture (Barbash and Taylor, 1997; Collier and Collier, 1986; Grady, 1996; Heider, 1976; Prosser, 1998; Rollwagen, 1988) 'delimit video research and video representation into two essentially different projects and in doing so restrict the potential of video representations for reflexive engagement with the research context' (Pink, 2007: 141).

While covert filming (such as CCTV cameras) or time-lapse footage, where hours of time are compressed into minutes, may come closer to capturing 'objective' footage, the camera itself, or the researcher behind it, will always alter the actions of those being filmed, as Eric Laurier and Chris Philo's recent work observing daily life in an Edinburgh cafe has shown (Laurier and Philo, 2006). And, of course, the consumption of the footage will also always have a range of interpretations – the viewer is an integral component in the triangulation of cultural representation (Clifford, 2001; Martinez, 1992). Even if objective representations were possible, objective footage could not be objectively consumed. All visually representational mediums are chaotically triangulated constructions between the subjectivity of the cameraperson, participants and viewers. For this reason, we might conceive of this discussion of footage as record, rather than breaking it into opposing binaries like 'real or staged', 'true or false', as a sliding scale of objective potentiality. Although collecting this footage may be useful

as a method, we often realize during the process of shooting that just as pure objectivity is impossible, so is the purely subjective (Kierkegaard, 1992).

#### 4 Reflexive filmmaking

When we plan, shoot, edit and disseminate video footage of our work, the resulting documents can be records of witnessed events and records of production experiences. Video footage is invaluable not only for what it contains but also for its (sometimes invisible) subtext, its ability to reveal what you chose not to use in the final product and its potential for recalling what may have otherwise been forgotten. This line of reasoning begins to edge towards the potentials of reflexive filmmaking – questions about who is behind the camera, who decided where to point it, who made the decisions about what to edit and why particular footage became foregrounded. Though the resulting shift in theoretical framework gives rise to both reflexive and participatory filmmaking, let us begin by thinking about the role of the subjectivity of the filmmaker(s).

Mermin (1997: 49) writes that 'film [should be conceptualized] as *experience* – and as such never completely controlled by film makers, subjects or viewers' experiences of reading and creating meaning from their films'. Taking it one step further, Cohen and Rapport (1995: 12) argue that ethnographic interpretations of our informants' actions and behaviours are simply 'an expression of our own consciousness'. This rather extreme point of view seizes agency from our informants, who, especially in the case of ethnographic video, are speaking with their own voices. This is not to say that we should not reflexively recognize (and quite possibly reveal in our 'publications') the researcher's prompting, provoking and mental excavation, but to say that the process reveals that what happened in front of the lens was an interpersonal negotiation in the representation triangle constellated by the participant, the researcher and the viewer. In the



words of David MacDougall, 'the film is a conceptual space within a triangle formed by the subject, film-maker, and audience and represents an encounter of all three' (MacDougall, 1978: 422). Reflexive filmmaking can elucidate these encounters.

Reflexivity could involve taking careful visual field notes or audio recordings of personal thoughts, experiences, activities and acknowledgements of biases to integrate into the edited work later. Alternatively, you could simply be brave enough to subject yourself to the same scrutiny as your participants, turning the camera literally around in your hand, or handing the camera to your informants, to include an experiential record of your own, which may serve to elucidate, or even complicate, what informants and collaborators are telling you. Undertaking this sort of self-reflection, 'the researcher becomes a part of the phenomenon being studied' (Flyvbjerg, 2002: 132), perhaps experiencing the uncomfortable role of being both inside and outside the project' (Sandercock and Attili, 2010: 26). Acknowledgement of the role of the film crew or researcher is an essential part of reflexive methodology; a recognition that one of the most important things happening in an ethnographic film is the fact that it is being produced at all (Ruby, 2005).

As with text, the acknowledgement of the role of the author is essential to a well-crafted reflexive film, perhaps primarily for the complications it inspires. This has been done, in a popular context, to great effectiveness by Nick Broomfield, a documentary filmmaker from London who began shooting films in the 1980s where, he seems to imply, the acknowledgement of the logistics of producing the film are as important as the subject matter itself.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Broomfield encountered limitations with the technique which encouraged him to later start using more of a narrative form to tell stories. The importance here, in any case, is to underpin reflexive filmmaking as a useful, yet underutilized, style or method.

When filming yourself filming the ethnography, the 'video making can appear [a] more visible, comprehensible activit[y] to informants, and may link more closely with their own experience' (Pink, 2007: 35). Participants become fully aware that you are making the film *together* and that you are just as much a participant as they are. This leads us to our final film form under consideration, participatory video.

### 5 Participatory video

Participatory video (PV), or community video (Kindon, 2003; White, 2003), allows participants on a project to articulate, in their own words, what it is they wish to have conveyed and, ideally, take control of the production process from the researcher. This technique was pioneered by filmmaker Jean Rouch in what he called the 'audiovisual counter-gift' (El Guindi, 2004: 179). Johansson *et al.* (1999: 36) comment that they 'cannot imagine a more effective method to quickly comprehend the often-complex perceptions and discourses of local people than to produce, watch, discuss and analyze PV material together with them' (cited in Kindon, 2003: 143). Despite desires to stay true to your informants' thoughts and wishes in text, the written word will always be mediated through your own subjectivity, filtered through a mind which has been 'colonized by the language of academia' (Bonnett, 2009). Participatory video gives research participants the opportunity to voice their own thoughts and opinions in their own way which ideally concludes with all parties seeing the film as an 'ongoing process of creating community' (Sandercock and Attili, 2010: 37).

Making a film, especially with PV methods, requires some level of intimate participation with your informants because 'documentary filmmaking is by nature collaborative. Quite simply, it's impossible to make a film about other people on your own' (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: 74). Even if you do not end up producing

anything from the footage, simply working on it together and sharing it allows you to use it as Schwartz (1992: 15) does ‘to talk with her informants who can teach her “how to interpret the images of their lives”’. Through to the editing process (Laurier et al., 2009), one can come to a much better understanding of what it is that your project participants value by creating mediated work together (Laurier, 2009) and that makes for good ethnographic method.

These potential collaborations with informants who provide us with so much can be ‘an imaginative act which should bring us into touch with the lives of strangers’ (Thomas, 1997: 143). Video can help to bridge gaps between informants and researchers by undermining notions of academic authority. Rather than simply alienating participants, as some have argued, participants are many times particularly intrigued by the equipment, especially if they see you filming yourself or you hand the equipment to them to use, allowing one to ‘break the ice’ quickly as conversations ensue about the nature of the technology, recording format and possible distribution channels for collaborative work. At times, the camera is actually less intrusive than a paper and pencil since one can use the flip out screen to maintain eye contact while talking and use it to play back footage and share experience of watching what has been recorded (Pink, 2007: 78). In Hester Parr’s work using video to access the lives and thoughts of people with enduring health care problems, she found that:

in the training for film-making my total lack of experience in camera work, planning shooting sequences and difficulty in relating to people in front of the camera as well as simultaneously paying attention to operation of the visual technology enabled our initial positions of authority to begin to become reworked, as I constantly made mistakes and was able to discuss ways of practising film-making with the other participants. (Parr, 2007: 121)

Parr’s work shows that even in the face of technical failure or lack of practical proficiency

(following from Rose’s previously cited concerns), participatory filmmaking can still be a process of collaboration and exchange, regardless of whether or not anything is actually produced in an edited or ‘final’ form from the fieldwork.

There are a number of reasons why working in this way would benefit geography, but of vital importance, in terms of ethnographic work in particular, is the concept of agency. The acknowledgement of, and willingness to share, authorship gives agency to your project participants. Taken to its logical conclusion, this will mean that by handing over control of your project you ‘expose the wiring’ of the method (Pearson and Shanks, 2001) and begin to ‘destabilize hierarchical power relations’, shifting from making a film *about* people to filming *with* people (Kendon, 2003: 142). This work was done to great effect by anthropologists Sol Worth and John Adair with the Diné (Navajo) people of the American Southwest (Worth and Adair, 1972) and even earlier by sociologists Low and Snowden in the late 1960s in Canada (Frantz, 2007). These methods have yet to be replicated with such effectiveness in a geographic context.

When Matthew Gandy completed his film *Liquid City*, he returned to Mumbai to screen the film in two showings, attended by mostly local people and some of his interviewees to see ‘whether the film had achieved its aims’ (Gandy, 2009: 406). He received some insightful feedback, which he then writes about. In Gandy’s case, feedback required the audience to attend a screening. In other cases, groups or individuals may need an internet connection capable of streaming video. While this may seem to exclude many who might watch the produced work, the fact is that most people are more likely to pay for an internet connection than an expensive ethnographic textbook or journal article, again flipping conventional wisdom about the accessibility of text (or the inaccessibility of video) on its head.

When films are screened to share the information you have learned, the participatory process continues as you show ‘clips from video interviews [that] can allow informants to “speak for themselves”’ (Pink, 2007: 149). Consider, in an ethnographic context, what is returned to participants on a project. In a traditional PhD thesis or Masters dissertation, for example, the end result, a massive piece of bound papers in a university library or a costly, bureaucratically quarantined electronic document, is inaccessible to almost everyone outside of the academy. I remember the guilt upon completing a previous research project (Garrett, 2010a) when I realized that the only thing I had to give back to the Native American community that had gifted me so many beautiful stories to write from was a document that was just as likely to put them to sleep as to instil a sense of satisfaction in advancing their political agenda or preserving their cultural traditions.

Photographs work well in these contexts – most people appreciate having photographs returned to them that they can use, distribute and archive. Writing for popular outlets such as newspapers and magazines might also be appreciated, but a video, either as a DVD handed back or put online to stream, to use at film festivals, talks and conferences is uniquely appreciated, as anyone who shoots home videos will tell you (Laurier, 2009). Additionally, in cases of engaged, activist and guerrilla geographies where participants have political agendas, film can provide ammunition for their efforts (Turner, 1992).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, digital video, as an ethnographic tool, has an enormous return to participants in many cases. This return can be heightened when participatory video methods are utilized to produce it.

Unlike the notebook, full of details that rarely make their way into the final product of a project, video retains many subtleties of experience though the editing process. It has been noted that ‘writing, especially academic writing, flees the particular and takes hold of the abstract, that

enemy of experience’ and that ‘sticking with the particular, sticking close with experience, is, if anything, more possible in anthropological film than in writing’ (Devereaux and Hillman, 1995: 71–72). As Eric Laurier’s work with rock climbers creating YouTube videos for friends has shown, it is the small things many times, the things you would have missed in written notes, that participants may value (Laurier, 2009), and with PV methods participants have the agency to choose what they want to include and exclude from those narratives.

### III Ethnographic possibilities

A conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them’ is a conversation in which ‘them’ is silenced. ‘Them’ always stand on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless, barely present in its absence. (Trinh, 1989: 67)

Although ethnography is a recognized methodology in geography, sociology and anthropology, the ways in which we do ethnographies may vary greatly (Crang and Cook, 2007). I will suggest conceptualizing this section in terms of ‘geographic’ ethnography, whatever that may mean to you, your research participants, or your audience. In terms of what constitutes ethnographic video, as Sarah Pink points out, ‘a video is ‘ethnographic’ when its viewer(s) judge that it represents information of ethnographic interest’ (Pink, 2007: 79).

Ethnography, traditionally characterized, will include both overt and/or covert observation of people’s daily lives for an extended period of time and will also include participation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Pink modifies this description by defining ethnography as ‘an approach to experiencing, interpreting and representing culture’ (Pink, 2007: 18). Both of these methods are common practice today in cultural geography research, and gaining in popularity, creating an important point of entry for use of digital video to produce ethnographic accounts (Sandercock and Attili, 2010). It has

been recently pointed out that ‘a long-standing criticism of ethnography concerns the lack of its “transparency”’; critics highlight the difficulties of recovering what the researcher saw and experienced undermining the ability of fellow scholars to form an independent judgement of the quality of the analysis’. The authors go on to suggest that ‘video . . . has the potential for the data on which analysis is based to be made available and examined’ (Hindmarsh et al., 2010: 7) lending more transparency to ethnographic work.

Ethnographic interviews are perhaps the most useful context for video collection and production. The reason for this is that video is multisensorial, capturing sound, image, movement, gesture, time and place. Photographs, Hastrup (1992: 10) argues, are a thin description, capturing form but not meaning. Hastrup goes on to write that in order for a photograph to become a piece of ethnographic thick description, it must be contextualized by text, a line of reasoning, as previously mentioned, recently made by Rose (2001). This idea might be disputed, given that photographs are also mediated through filters of multiple subjectivities and may also be ‘participatory’, but video may be more respectful and accurate in terms of ethnographic storytelling, primarily because participants gain visual as well as aural influence over a project and are able to have increased control both over what is seen and what is said about their images, especially in a participatory video environment (Sandercock and Attili, 2010; Shaw and Robertson, 1997). This makes our work more slippery and difficult to negotiate, but also potentially more rich and vibrant.

Ethnographic methods work best in this way, without templates for how work should take place. We should be ready to accept that ‘ethnographic strategies are . . . shaped by the subjects’ situations, their global as well as local perceptions, and their demands and expectations of us’ (Josephides, 1997: 32, referenced in Pink, 2007: 4). As a result, Josephides argues, whether

we are writing, recording, participating or observing, ‘there can be no blueprint for how to do fieldwork. It really depends on the local people, and for this reason, we have to construct our theories of how to do fieldwork *in the field*’ (Josephides, 1997: 32, referenced in Pink, 2007: 4). Carrying a video camera allows for this flexibility as participants guide you to what they think is important, setting your agenda spontaneously as you move, creating de Certeau’s space of tactic where experience, cultural memory and everyday life can be the events most worth recording. The moments of inspiration, intrigue and transgression reside in the small spaces of experience captured by the diaphragm of the camera lens, in your hands or theirs, in your stories or theirs.

What is captured on camera during an ethnographic shoot is more likely to be a mediation of experience rather than a reflection on experience. When we are recording fieldwork activity, it is not usually reflection we are looking for in the moment – this can be achieved later in a video elicitation interview with project participants, or in the office far later while reviewing field notes, diaries, photographs and video footage. Subjectively mediated content produced after fieldwork is important and useful, but video of participants’ direct thoughts and experiences are just as important, threading in more of the multiple subjectivities and interests that exist in every project, capturing the ‘sensuous interrelationship of mind-body-environment’ (Howes, 2005: 7) in the peculiar moments of the present tense.

Ideally, one would be able to pull from multiple media for recall, video for images and audio as well as field notes for thoughts had while shooting, creating multimodal, multisensual, multimedia ethnographies intended to integrate more of the embodied experience of the research process into the product. As Laurier and Philo observe, ‘video also promises that the fallible ethnographer’s memory of what happened which was once supported by the notebook gains further

strength through the recordings as an archive of details in one particular place at one particular time' (Laurier and Philo, 2006: 190). 'The video records hold the promise that the researcher might examine past activities not as *past* but rather as "formerly present"' (Raffel, 1979, quoted in Laurier and Philo, 2006 [italics original]). This 'formerly present' is the embodied experience of being in the world that we attempt to recapture in our stories, photographs, articles and recollections when we 'return' home. These story fragments, played and replayed through a multisensorial medium, create unique points of memorial reconciliation and experience/re-experience.

As Laurier and Brown show in their painstaking work on the hand gestures of fishermen captured on video (Laurier and Brown, 2009), there is a great deal that cannot be written or spoken that can be expressed through performance, gesture and polysemous representation on film (Hindmarsh et al., 2010). 'The idea that written text inspires reflexive reading, while visual text does not ... underestimates the potential of photography and video for ethnographic representation and is challenged by the practical and theoretical work of "visual" ethnographers' (Pink, 2007: 116) and culturally sensitive filmmakers (McLeod and Maynor, 2001) who have effectively made critical cultural work that is not only of intellectually challenging breadth and depth but also publicly accessible. Work of this sort encourages projects that include the participation of those outside of academia (Pinder, 2005) and situates geography within new media enterprise, an essential step if the field is to remain contemporary.

#### **IV Multimodal, multisensory, multimedia research**

An argument for a more widespread use of video extends the braided threads of technological possibility and audience engagement. The last section ended with a discussion of new digital

media; here I focus on the rapidly increasing capacity of video for multisensory representation. Video is inherently 'not primarily a visual medium. It is a medium that operates on two of the five senses at once, and it is an uninteresting question to discuss whether or which of these senses is dominant' (Jarvie, 1987: 236). Although Jarvie is obviously referring to the audio/visual component of video, I will add that in particular situations video footage, especially high-definition and three-dimensional footage, invokes olfactory and tactile sensory perceptions as well. This multisensual audience-engaging experience is, again, particularly useful when working on a project which seeks to give voice to people or ideas (Turner, 1992), inspire action (Schienke and Brown, 2003) or depict the character of a place, with or without words (Hansen, 2008).

The experience of watching a video and 'feeling' the cold of an icy peak (Marshall, 1993) or 'smelling' a landfill where people are picking through trash to find recyclables to sell (Fricke, 1992) remind us of the possibilities multimedia offers. Memories of places become blurred as we feel we have been to them and then realize that memory is virtual. On the website for Cave City Park in Kentucky, the majority of visitors preferred the experience of watching an IMAX video of the cave than actually visiting it. Visitors at the Grand Canyon told researchers they wanted 'to show our children what we've been seeing ... [and] you just can't find words to say what you see, so we bought those videos and they can get an idea of where we've been' (Neumann, 2002: 38). Whether we see this mentality as a tragic disembodiment or a testament to the wonders of modern technology, the comments clearly highlight the (perhaps unexpected) sensorial power of new media and documentary film. It also begs consideration of the tension between the embodied and the visual. Although I will not argue here that video bridges the gap into becoming embodied experience (yet), it is the medium which most wholly conjures a multisensual facsimile of experience.



Eric Laurier, upon reading Vivian Sobchack's book *Carnal Thoughts, Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Sobchack, 2004) notes that Sobchack wants us to realize that 'cinema engages so much more of our bodies than the eyes alone ... a film can touch its viewer and elicit its viewers' experience of touch' (Laurier, 2009: 11). This polysensuality also allows one to use film to map the unseen, to record emotion and memory – issues that are well recognized as contributing significantly to our perceptions of place (Davidson et al., 2005; DeSilvey, 2007; Edensor, 2005a, 2005b; Feld and Basso, 1996). As Youngs (1980: 3) points out, 'film therefore can provide data on at least two levels of consciousness – tangible and intangible'. Youngs goes on to proclaim 'personally, it is the latter that is most significant'.

Writing particularly to the documentary form, Gold (2002: 209) contends that 'the documentary can convey a sense of visiting places and witnessing events in the company of an apparently knowledgeable observer. Indeed, few other media impart a more direct sense of being "there"'. That is to say, not just producing but viewing documentary films can help us to build a sense of place though simulacraic suggestions of embodied experience. These psychological 'tricks' are possible because of the effectiveness of video to relay experience and to invoke our material attachments, memories, dreams and emotional entanglements. In some cases, these feelings are a sympathetic connection with the filmmaker themselves, as you put yourself behind the camera and fear for their safety or share their excitement (Moretti and Smith, 2006). This is especially effective in reflexive videography such as the TV show *Survivorman* (Stroud, 2004–2008) and *Alone in the Wild* (Wardle, 2009). This attempt at first-person virtual embodiment has also been invoked powerfully in a recent issue of *Social Research Online* where the authors use head-mounted video cameras to depict the sensations of mountain bikers' and walkers' 'embodied, multi-sensory

ways of knowing and experiencing landscapes' (Brown et al., 2008: 1.1).

In addition, many researchers seek alternative forms of multisensory representations encouraged by non-representational (Thrift, 2008) and more-than-representational geographic theorists who undertake 'diverse work that seeks better to cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds' (Lorimer, 2005: 83). Video footage can become one avenue to these alternative forms of experience beyond, or beside, written accounts.

Anthropologists using visual media describe video as a 'culture map' depicting a 'social landscape' and argue that video is particularly useful for the creation of 'cognitive maps' (Crick, 1976, referenced in Hastrup, 1992: 19), nomenclature that will find a particular resonance with cultural geographers grappling with largely intangible information about conceptions of place, landscape, culture and especially mobility, ideas captured in the work of Laurier (2006), Spinney (2008) and Cresswell (1993), among others.

Increasingly, geographers are reaching into intangible knowledge (that is, not rooted in materiality) to construct narratives of place (DeLyser, 1999, 2004; Edensor, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2008; Holloway and Kneale, 2008; Lipman, 2009; Maddern, 2008; Maddern and Adey, 2008). This work manifests itself in writings about memorial events, ghostly presences, feelings and emotions that embed themselves in places, hiding in dark corners to be invoked by a passerby, places where even a whisper shatters our perception of what is, what was and what could be. Video is one method of recalling and relating those experiences to those who were not present.

Video is ideal for recording the immaterial, even used to create memories of places one has never experienced. Only stories can tell those tales of 'symbolic representations, evocative of (for instance) emotions, experiences, power relations or inequalities' (Pink, 2007: 111) and those stories thrive in videographic



representations, whether or not we deem these depictions to be 'truthful' or 'accurate'.

Recent advances in digital media (read: the Photoshop age) challenge notions that what you see is what you get (Jenkins, 2006) and have actually increased understanding that representations are subject to critique, remix and contestation. When the 'truthfulness' of video recordings is contested, it only serves to enrich interpretation as we debate the nature of truth in visual depictions (Myrick and Sánchez, 1999, and Charles, 2006, produced two films that were enriched by arguments over their 'truthfulness').

Text has acquired an exalted status through the editorial process, leaving us at a point in time when memoirs found to contain fictitious moments are considered scandalous (Frey, 2005) and collectively edited texts or 'wikis' are treated with suspicion by scholars. Published books and scholarly articles are viewed as the only 'definitive' sources to reference. Perhaps the level of distrust of multimedia, and the criticism that comes in that package, rather than being a pitfall, is in fact one of the selling points of visual methods as a tool for research. Visual documents are debated, disputed, remixed and contested long after their production, keeping them alive and contemporary well into the future. The contestation over early space images taken by the Apollo Space program are an excellent example (Cosgrove, 2005).

With all of these possibilities for videographic engagement outlined, it is my hope to have contributed to an awareness of the wealth of possibilities in use, form and interpretation that video offers to geography. We have not yet begun to unravel the potential of the medium and increasing interest in video as method inspires hope for future efforts. Let me now conclude by reiterating the potential for videographic geographies.

## V Conclusion

Although geographers have done extensive work in cinematic critique, video, as I hope to

have now shown, is particularly useful in the production of geographic knowledge in complementary methodological contexts. The first is in ethnographic interviews and field excursions, where every moment may be the 'important' one, video here serving as an important record. Video is an effective medium for recording conversations and geographic experiences of place, situated in and around the videographer's field of vision. I have argued that, like field notes, 'video materials should be treated as *representations* rather than visual facts' (Pink, 2007: 88), and that these representations are largely experiential, given that the agency of the gaze (Crang, 1997; Urry, 1990) rests with the videographer, making video 'a representation of [the videographer's] experience of reality' (Pink, 2007: 112). I then discussed the ways in which video can be used to expose those qualifications, fallacies and biases of self by turning the camera around to record reflexive experiences and interpersonal negotiations to subvert classist, racist, elitist or colonial gazes by allowing one to look alongside rather than look at research participants by filming together in a participatory video environment (Kinson, 2003; Sandercock and Attili, 2010) and gave examples of situations where immaterial meaning is being teased out through multisensorial videographic depictions.

There are myriad methods and techniques one could use within the videographic geography model, from relatively low-quality head-mounted cameras (Brown et al., 2008; Spinney, 2008) to cameras mounted in cars (Laurier et al., 2008) to sitting in cafes on tripods (Laurier, 2006) to handheld peripatetic videography techniques (Laurier and Brown, 2009; Pink, 2009; Witmore, 2005). These methods, despite proving their importance on a number of different projects that employed video, remain underutilized. This is unfortunate as video has the potential to act as such a useful bridge between what we experience and what we produce.

Barbash and Taylor (1997: 74–75) once wrote that 'film is quintessentially a phenomenological

medium, and it may have a different orientation to social life than . . . monographs. It has a unique capacity to evoke human experience, what it feels like to actually be-in-the-world'. Along with revealing some of the experiences of the researcher, the camera gives informants the opportunity to speak with their own voice. It is understood when watching a documentary film that 'the person with the camera is a witness to the events' (Scannell, 2006, quoted in Laurier, 2009) and we then too become witnesses (not limited to vision) in a videographic production.

The camera captures a record of experience that can be, at times, difficult or even painful to watch. It may contradict your memory of events, memories which, 'when the adventure is over [become] disconnected from daily existence, taking on a dreamlike quality' (Laurier, 2009: 5). But this discomfort invites inquiry and invokes the spectre of multiple interpretations by questioning the 'truthfulness' of memory itself. Memories of experiences are, one may realize in review of fieldwork footage, highly affected by the presence of the researcher. The material you acquire, due to this, may encourage one to appeal to lucidity through reflexive filmmaking. Reflexive filmmaking also is, conveniently enough, fundamentally experiential, adding a transparent depth to your interpretations.

Interminglings between self and others through the encounters that situate ethnographies reveal how the researchers' experience and the experiences of project participants shape what is eventually created to represent a joint vision of time spent together. A recognition develops that the act of shooting video has actually transformed self-understandings, creating memories where none may have existed (Lury, 1998: 2). These realizations lead to the possibility of a new awareness of negotiated memory which affects the way that one films, spontaneously envisioning a *future memory of the present* while filming, building a spontaneous appreciation for which shots are going to become mediated experiential record, inspiring what ethnographic

filmmaker Mike Yorke calls filmmaking intentionality (personal communication during the Oxford Academy of Documentary Film Training summer workshop, London, 2009), or what we might simply call a heightened field awareness.

Literature of course is also written with intentionality and many of the arguments made in this paper could just as well be applied to alternative forms of written work, but that does not contradict the needs and desires for visual methods. Education studies have conclusively revealed that people learn and work in different ways, be it auditory, visual, tactile or sequenced (Dunn et al., 2002). The academic expectation that everyone be a 'good' writer and produce written work over and above all else is antiquated and is stifling a wealth of untapped creative potential in the academy. It is also limiting our ability to teach students who are increasingly interested in more than 'traditional' models of learning and knowledge production, students who are eager to film, to make music, to perform and to let methods and the creation of knowledge unfold in the flow of experience. Offering the possibility of academic work in different formats will encourage new generations of scholars to press the boundaries of knowledge production in novel directions and inspire students to do what works for them.

In a teaching environment, it is often difficult to get students to understand concepts such as immaterial meaning and cultural difference, and many students find that descriptions written by ethnographers about somebody else's experiences do not convey that nearly as well as when people are speaking for themselves (Butler, 2007). As Gold (2002: 209) points out, 'anyone who makes regular use of documentary film in the higher education classroom will be aware that the medium can offer advantages beyond the capabilities of other sources'. Film, photographs, raw video footage and multimedia documents lend flexibility to learning and inspire unexpected collaborations and insights that extend beyond academic departments and disciplinary boundaries.

With the growing media savviness of new generations of geographers, increasing government pressure for ‘economic relevancy’, and increasing public interest in what we do, it is imperative that we begin to utilize all of the tools available to us to begin engaging the public and encouraging alternative forms of critical engagement. This commitment is critical to maintaining geography’s foothold as a contemporary discipline. With the slow but inevitable changes we are seeing taking place in terms of openness to new forms of publication, with journals increasingly going ‘digital’, and with increased collaborations between artists and geographers (Crang, 2010), the moment has arrived to realize the potential of videographic geographies. What is needed now is for researchers to become multimedia producers.

Videographic geographies are imbued with a potential, realized in anthropology, of giving voice to the weak, of creating stronger bonds between researchers and project participants and for allowing us to record the exciting moments of everyday life in new ways and share those moments with a wide range of audiences. Videographic work gives researchers an avenue to depict place, culture, society, gesture, movement, rhythm and flow in new and exciting ways. An increase in geographic video production will build on our potential to weave a rich tapestry of multisensorial depictions that touch more lives, inspire more change and gain more momentum than other contemporary forms of publication. The time has arrived to expand our methodological optics to begin considering the video camera as an essential tool for geographic research. It is my hope that in doing so, the result will be an enrichment and vitalization of our encounters and narratives, a move that will keep geography on the cutting edge of knowledge production for many years to come.

## Notes

1. There has been considerable debate surrounding Flaherty’s work, with many scholars insisting that he

‘staged’ his visual ethnography *Nanook of the North* (Smith, 2002). Perhaps unexpectedly, the debates surrounding the film actually served to invigorate the discipline as others set out to do visual ethnography ‘properly’.

2. The topic of ethics in regard to use of video in fieldwork is a complex one. Rather than covering it superficially here, I would refer you to Hindmarsh, Heath and Luff’s (2010) book *Video in Qualitative Research* or Jon Prosser’s chapter in *Ethics and Research in Inclusive Education: Values into Practice* called ‘The moral maze of image ethics’ (Prosser, 2005) to begin researching how this may fit into your work (available at: <http://www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas/visualsock02.htm>).
3. Available at: [http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles1\(3\)/SCP.mp4](http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles1(3)/SCP.mp4).
4. Available at: <http://blip.tv/file/2930413>.
5. Perhaps most notably with Doreen Massey, Patrick Wright, Iain Sinclair and Matthew Flintham for his work on the film *Robinson in Ruins* which was part of a panel discussion at the Landscape and Environment conference organized by Stephen Daniels at Tate Britain, 25–26 June 2010.
6. A trailer for this film is available at: <http://www.zed.fr/en/catalog/view/66>.
7. Open University podcasts are located at: <http://podcast.open.ac.uk>.
8. The video can be viewed on the British Library Sport and Society page at: <http://www.bl.uk/sportandsociety/legacy/articles/waterways.html>.
9. Another example of wonderfully reflexive popular film is *A Complete History of My Sexual Failures* (2008) by director Chris Waitt.
10. See <http://vimeo.com/3334673> for an example of a guerrilla geography film made in just one day.

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