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Ethnographic Film and Video on Hybrid Television: Learning from the Content, Style, and Distribution of Popular Ethnographic Documentaries

Phillip Vannini[1]

Abstract

Academic ethnographers have been utilizing film, and more recently video, for a variety of research purposes including the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data. But ethnographic film and video are not the exclusive domain of university-based ethnographers or professionally trained ethnographic researchers. More and more ethnographic films and video documentaries are nowadays produced by filmmakers who aren't necessarily interested in utilizing their work to advance anthropological, sociological, or other disciplines' theoretical or substantive agendas. Interestingly, these documentaries often garner wider distribution and larger audiences than ethnographic films and videos made by academics, leading us to question the identity of ethnographic documentary and the potential of this genre to both advance ethnological knowledge and the sociocultural imagination. In this article, I examine this phenomenon focusing on nonacademic wide-distribution ethnographic documentaries available on cable and satellite TV, Netflix, and iTunes, reflecting on their content, style, distribution strategies, and their status as social scientific ethnographic representations.

[1]Royal Roads University, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Phillip Vannini, Royal Roads University, 2005 Sooke Road, Victoria, British Columbia, V9B 5Y2, Canada.
Email: phillip.vannini@royalroads.ca

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Academic ethnographers have for a long time turned to film, and more recently to digital video, to collect, analyze, and represent empirical knowledge (see Henley 2000; Hindmarsh and Tutt 2012; MacDougall 2011; Pink 2007; Ruby 2000). Though traditionally some scholars have viewed film and video[1] with some skepticism—because of the inherent subjectivity and the semiotic limitations of the audiovisual mode (Pink 2006, 2007)—as of late more and more academic ethnographers have come to agree on film's remarkable potential to express ethnological matters otherwise difficult or downright impossible to convey through other modes (see Bates 2014; Grimshaw 2011; Henley 2000; Pink 2006, 2007; Shrum, Duque, and Brown 2005; Suhr and Willerslev 2012; Thieme 2012). While it is still rare to find full-time, university-employed social scientists who make film production the exclusive or even dominant focus of their career, film and video as vehicles for research output are becoming more common, as evidenced by the recent publication of the first ever refereed journal solely dedicated to showcasing video ethnography, the *Journal of Video Ethnography*, by the *Innovative Ethnographies* hypermedia book series published by Routledge, and by a large number of publications focused on the methodological developments of video methods (e.g., Bates 2014; Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2012) and ethnographic film (e.g., Barbash and Taylor 1997; Crawford and Turton 1992; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; MacDonald 2013; MacDougall 2000; Russell 1999).

Interestingly enough, however, the audiovisual production and distribution of ethnological material is no longer—if it ever was to begin with (see Ruby 2000, 27)—the sole province of academically trained and university-employed ethnographers. Together with the increasing popularity of the ethnographic documentary genre among popular audiences and its escalating economic viability; the fragmentation of the television medium into a hybrid consisting of multiple, interactive, on-demand, digital channels; and the constantly improving technological possibilities afforded by user-friendly HD and Hi-Fi recording tools and desktop nonlinear editing software (MacDougall 2001; Shrum, Duque, and Brown 2005), the nonacademic ethnographic documentary[2] has become a commonly practiced and widely recognized feature of popular film culture—at least if we are to judge by the sheer quantity of such films shown on hybrid television platforms such as Netflix and iTunes and cable/satellite channels such as HBO and the Documentary Channel. Provocatively, but not without a great degree of candor, one could venture to

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say that "amateur" or at least "self-fashioned" ethnographers have outshone their "professional" academic counterparts, at least in the domain of popular reach.[3]

The intent of this paper is to reflect on the growing popularity of nonacademic ethnographic films distributed through wide dissemination media such as hybrid TV channels in order to assess what precisely characterizes these productions in terms of content and style and to reflect on what the rest of us—university-based ethnographers—can learn from ethnographic documentary filmmakers' representational and dissemination practices. This article concentrates in particular on the emergence of a dominant ethnographic documentary style, what Nichols (2010) has called the "participatory" style, and moves on to dissect its qualities and to reflect what ethnographic writers can learn from them. Let it be noted that I do not pretend to present a "study" in the conventional sense of the term. A systematic textual analysis of the whole population of ethnographic documentaries available on hybrid TV (a medium whose boundaries are very fuzzy) would consist of several hundred titles. But limited time availability is no excuse; the true trouble with determining membership in this population, or with selecting a "representative" sample, is that inclusion or exclusion would be a hopelessly subjective call. Also, provided that a population or sample could ever be systematically selected, the precise determination of which ethnographic film belongs to which tradition is a notoriously slippery practice bound to be impossibly unreliable. Hence I write not a research study but a review essay of sorts, and hopefully an informed and opinionated reading of the field meant to stimulate future discussion, critique, and hopefully a bit of controversy.

Many of my readers might opine that comparing the documentaries shown on the popular channels I have paid attention to, and the films regularly produced by university-based ethnographers and shown at ethnographic film festivals, conferences, and in the classrooms of educational institutions worldwide, is a bit like comparing apples and oranges. Indeed these skeptical readers might argue that none of the documentaries I have listed in the filmography of this article (see appendix) can be reasonably said to constitute an ethnographic production. Ethnographic films, such argument might run, are audiovisual productions by definition created by professional ethnographers who are committed to the advancement of ethnological knowledge and the pertinent theories prevalent in their discipline and subfields (see Ruby 2000, 26–39). I simply beg to differ. I understand an ethnographic documentary to be simply an audiovisual portrayal of aspects of a person's or people's way of life, regardless of who produced or directed it. Let us begin by discussing this point in greater depth in the context of the historical evolution of ethnographic film and video.

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Ethnographic Film Today

A film's intended audience has often served as a key criterion for its identification as an ethnographic documentary (Ruby 2000). Historically, ethnographic film has meant to serve teaching purposes (Asch, Marshall, and Spier 1973; Heider 2006; Ruby 2000) and in fact classic films like *Nanook of the North, Les Maitres Fous, The Hunters, Dead Birds, Forest of Bliss*, and *The Ax Fight* have been viewed by thousands of ethnography students in university classrooms worldwide. However, thanks to the *Disappearing World* series broadcast in the 1980s on Granada channel in the United Kingdom, or as part of shorter-lived series or one-off specials on BBC in the United Kingdom, PBS in the United States, or on CBC in Canada, several ethnographic films have reached broader audiences as well, so historically it has not been so easy to define ethnographic film solely by its intended audience.

Subject matter has also played a key role in identifying a film's "ethnographic nature." The subject matter of most classic ethnographic films and TV productions has pertained to the customs, rituals, and social organization of non-Western peoples—testament to the fact that the history of ethnographic film has often run parallel with the development of anthropology (many of these films' directors, it should be noted, were not anthropologists; anthropologists were often involved in productions as consultants, cowriters, subject matter experts, or coproducers). However, just like the issue of audience, the criterion of subject matter is not so straightforward. For some (invariably, anthropologists), ethnographic film must always represent the ways of life of non-Western people (see Crawford and Turton 1992; Ruby 2000). However, as anthropology continues undergoing processes of diversification because of mounting postcolonial, antifoundationalist, and postrepresentational critiques, this argument falls into disfavor—not to mention that such proprietorial definitions of the field have always irked ethnographers working outside of anthropology. Also, there are fewer and fewer productions focused on this subject matter today. Perhaps almost all "exotic worlds" have disappeared, perhaps audiences are tired of the old conventions of the genre, or perhaps globalizing forces have forced producers to shift their focus, but the reality is that it would be impossible today to utilize classic subject matter to identify the nature of ethnographic film (see Eraso 2006).

Given the difficulties inherent in defining ethnographic film in light of its subject matter or intended audience, some scholars have opined that ethnographic film rather consists of descriptions of social and cultural phenomena—such as experiences, practices, and expressions—supplemented by their theoretical interpretation and analysis (e.g., see many of the essays in Crawford and Turton 1992). Understood this way, film can play an

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instrumental role in the advancement of an academic discipline, adding to existing substantive knowledge and theory. For Ruby, for example, "if the term *ethnographic* is to retain any of its original meaning, it is most profitably applied only to those films produced by competent ethnographers and explicitly designed to be ethnographies" (2000, 28) and any use by anyone else constitutes a misappropriation.

For others, instead, ethnographic film need not explicitly advance theoretical discussions and disciplinary debates (e.g., Crawford 1992, 74). Its audiences and topics, therefore, can be multiple and vast. Karl Heider's perspective on the identity of ethnographic film epitomizes the most liberal of perspectives (curiously so, given his otherwise traditional preferences for a realist style and approach to subject matter). For him "in the broadest sense most films are ethnographic—that is, if we take 'ethnographic' to mean 'about people'" (Heider 2006, 1). Thus, reality-inspired but fictional films like *Hotel Rwanda* or *Traffic* are ethnographic, for they can be examined as a pedagogical instrument in order to learn about the worldviews of the people who made them and about their depiction of reality.

My perspective is somewhere in the middle between these two extremes. Ethnographic film/video, I contend, is by necessity about people's ways of life, but it should be confined to nonfictional accounts and therefore to the documentary tradition. In contrast to Ruby, I believe that "involvement with the people being studied" (Ruby 2000, 29) through fieldwork and interviews, empathic role-taking, and proper contextualization is sufficient for a film/video to be considered ethnographic—regardless of whether the production team consists of university and otherwise professionally affiliated ethnographers, and regardless of whether their work is intended for the prototypical audiences of ethnographic work (i.e., scholars and students). My definition arises from the realization that the interpretive spirit, subject matter, research approach, balance of empirical data and contextualization, thematic organizational formatting, and educational goals and objectives of the articles published in an ethnology journal such as this one, and the "social and cultural" documentaries available on today's market are remarkably similar, if not synonymous.[4] The mode (writing vs. audiovisual) and medium (refereed journal vs. hybrid TV) may be different, and therefore the product different, but the genre is similar. The question of whether something is defined as ethnographic or not, in the end, may then simply depend on narrowly political and often parochial considerations that have often been divisive and unduly exclusive.

Scholars, in fact, have often been unkind toward filmmaking as an interpretive practice. As Henley (2000, 208) observed a few years ago,

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> The enthusiasm of these distinguished early pioneers of the discipline was not shared by many of those in ensuing generations. For the harsh truth is that the use of film in subsequent anthropological research has not been impressive: with a few notable exceptions, key figures in the discipline have rarely, if ever, used film in their own work. . . . Filmmaking has remained a marginal activity. It may be promoted energetically by a few specialists, followed eagerly by legions of students, but it is still received by a majority of professional anthropologists with what may be described, at best, as politeness rather than enthusiasm.

Henley's observations pertain to anthropology, but certainly the argument can be extended to most other social scientific disciplines. Things have changed in the last decade, but a full transformation is yet to occur. And how it could it be otherwise?—one might be tempted to ask. Ethnographic filmmaking can be time-consuming, expensive, skill-intensive, and it typically requires laborious collaborations and the solving of numerous and complex ethical, aesthetic, and logistical quandaries (Barbash and Taylor 1997; Henley 2000; Thieme 2012). Furthermore, the payoffs are generally limited. Open-access distribution on YouTube and Vimeo makes it easy nowadays to share one's work with large audiences but actual views are still incredibly limited (hardly ever does an ethnographic production on these websites receive more than a defeatingly meager two thousand views). To boot, network television channels seldom bother to show ethnographic films produced by academics (MacDougall 2001), and distribution companies specialized in educational DVDs, hampered by the high cost of selling educational licenses, are more and more challenged by shrinking university libraries' budgets.

However, if we agree that ethnographic productions best serve the purpose of facilitating informal learning in both the classroom and in the average viewer's living room, and that therefore they—through a combination of entertainment and education—are optimal tools in piquing curiosity for further education by mobilizing awareness and stimulating attention (Nisbet and Aufderheide 2009), then why not view the fieldwork-based documentaries of non-university-affiliated filmmakers as perfectly serviceable for the development of ethnographic knowledge? In other words, provided that writing as a mode of communication is vastly superior to visual modes for the scope of transmitting abstract, conceptual, theoretical material (see Eraso 2006; Henley 2000), and given that book- and article-writing are infinitely a more profitable career choice than film for academic ethnographers (Henley 2000), why not turn to fieldwork-based documentaries produced by nonacademics *for what they have to counteroffer*: their superior evocative, narrative, sensuous, performative, and attention-grabbing qualities (MacDougall 2001; Pink 2006; Suhr and Willerslev 2012) and therefore for *their potential to bring ethnological knowledge in the limelight*?

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Such widening of the field might have been seen as a corruption of ethnographic standards a few years ago, but ethnographic documentary film/video has changed dramatically lately. The "social and cultural documentaries" available today on Netflix, the "anthropological documentaries" available on iTunes, and the films on channels like HBO and the Documentary Channel that I have identified as ethnographic for this paper are masterfully produced and engaging to watch, not to mention typically responsibly researched as well. The standards they have set for contemporary ethnographic film is ambitiously high and undoubtedly rewarding for any spectator interested in entertaining informal learning. To be sure, these documentaries may teach us little about theory or conceptual issues[5]—can *any* film really do that?—but they can teach us a lot about ethnographic representation and about playing a greater role in the public sphere.

Documentary Styles

Several commentators have identified alternative styles of documentary film production (e.g., Barbash and Taylor 1997; Bruzzi 2000; Crawford 1992; Nichols 2010). These styles describe the way a documentary is scripted, shot, and edited, and therefore the stance a producer, writer, and director take toward the politics and aesthetics of audiovisual representation. Obviously these styles are tendencies; no filmmaking team strives too hard to fit their film into a "template," and no critic believes that an ideal type can be perfectly matched by actual practice. Various elements of style are in fact regularly mixed, borrowed from, adapted, and reinvented so that each creation ends up being a hybrid of different forms and sources of inspiration. With this said, just like Adler and Adler (2008) profitably identified four genres of contemporary ethnographic writing—classical, mainstream, postmodern, and public—it seems useful to identify different styles of ethnographic documentation. In what follows I will describe six; however, I argue that among widely distributed productions one style—what Nichols (2010) calls "participatory" style—has lately clearly emerged as dominant. I begin by identifying the first five and later focus in greater depth on the latter.

The *poetic* style is synonymous with avant-garde, experimental traditions. Poetic documentaries pay a great deal of attention to form, focusing on aesthetic considerations at every step of the way. They are generally rather playful, ambiguous, fragmented, and disorderly—aiming to give a sense of life through relatively random cinematic "slices of life" that attract the viewer for their enchanting visual (and at times aural) beauty as much as anything else. As a result, editing may be discontinuous, human characters may not be fully formed, and a continuous or clear sense of spatial and temporal location may

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be absent. In light of this, the individuals portrayed in these films may fall in the background of artistic expression, as filmmakers attempt to foreground instead material objects, place, or creative expressions of human behavior as well as interpersonal and atmospheric mood, tone, and affect. A musical soundtrack is common but there is typically no voiceover in this style, or perhaps the voiceover may be present but characterized more by a lyrical intent than by the intent to convey knowledge or to persuade.

Popular films like *Baraka* and *Samsara* exemplify well how poetic documentaries do not aim to convey information linearly, thus problematizing the way knowledge about specific subject matter is produced, communicated, and experienced. Because of the importance they place on spell-binding imagery and sound, poetic documentaries have traditionally received very little TV coverage. However, with TV sets' growth in screen size, as well as image and sound quality, HD poetic documentaries are becoming more common in the living room. *¡Vivan Las Antipodas!*—which evokes sense of place through slices of life taking place in some of the world's antipodes—and *Manufactured Landscapes*—which shows how modern day industrialism can affect landscape and sense of place are two other clear examples. Because of the style's conventions, some readers and viewers will note that it is not entirely clear how truly ethnographic even the most ethnographically focused poetic documentaries can be.

The *expository* style is the ethnographic documentary modality that has been traditionally associated with television and educational productions (see Crawford and Turton 1992). Expository documentaries are tidy collations of the social and cultural world that are accompanied by a clear and authoritative voiceover—sometimes known as "the voice of God"—which, from a distance, makes sense of the images for the viewer. Didactic argumentation, not unlike the kind happening in a traditional lecture, addresses audiences in order to interpret and contextualize the film's visual subject matter. Expository documentaries use images to support the role of spoken logic, as in illustration or visual aid. Editing is done in an evidentiary way: aiming to organize images in order to support seemingly objective and well-supported narration.

Expository documentaries have undergone years of constant attack by anthropologists who—after having utilized the style themselves for several decades—have come to terms with the patronizing attitude held by these films' producers toward their audiences and with the colonizing gaze they imposed on the unwitting subjects before the camera. Expository style documentaries are now less and less common, even on network television. However, when intelligently combined with other elements of style, exposition can still work well. Werner Herzog's exquisite *Happy People*—the outcome of an extended amount of fieldwork among trappers in the Russian

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Taiga—exemplifies, at least in part, this style. As this film evidences, the voiceover technique has dramatically changed and continues to borrow elements from the tradition of situated and perspectival storytelling and from other documentary styles (see Bruzzi 2000).

The *reflexive* style of documentation, as the name suggests, is characterized by the obvious and explicit presence of the filmmaker and by a sustained attention to filmmaking itself as an artistic and political creation. As opposed to the distant "voice of God" of the narrator of expository films, and in contrast to the utter absence of the writer/director in the poetic style, reflexive ethnographic documentaries allow audiences to engage directly with the director, writer, and/or the camera-operator as they go about the business of filming. In this sense, the maker(s) of the documentary become one of the main protagonists of a film. In *180° South*, for example, we follow self-styled adventurer Jeff Johnson and his team of friends *cum* film crew as they journey through Patagonia as they meet locals active in outdoor leisure and environmental conservation. Johnson narrates his journey as he critically engages issues of economic development in the context of conservation and sustainable living.

As in all reflexive documentaries, the actual process of filming *180° South* becomes a key concern of the film, as the crew/friends reflect on their challenges in a self-conscious and candid way, presenting the viewers with their struggles, their alternate filmic and travel plans, and all their vicissitudes. As Nichols (2010, 127) observes in regard to this style:

> At its best, reflexive documentary prods the viewer to a heightened form of consciousness about her relation to a documentary and what it represents. Achieving a heightened form of consciousness involves a shift in levels of awareness. Reflexive documentary sets out to readjust the assumptions and expectations of its audience, not add new knowledge to existing categories. For this reason, documentaries can be reflexive from both formal and political perspectives. From a formal perspective, reflexivity draws our attention to our assumptions and expectations about documentary form itself. From a political perspective, reflexivity points toward our assumptions and expectations about the world around us.

Just like reflexive documentaries, *performative* films allow us to question how we come to know what we know through film. Therefore, rather than merely transmitting knowledge, performative documentaries enact ethnological knowledge through the unfolding of concrete, embodied, affective experiences in the tradition of rhetoric, literature, and the visual and performing arts. Performative ethnographic documentaries may or may not give the filmmaker a visible role, but what is explicit and evident in these productions

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is the process of documentary creation itself and how the subject matter portrayed in the film is a direct outcome of the act of documentation. Therefore, factuality and fiction become blurred. Actual events and imagined, fantasized, striven-for, recalled, or reconstructed realities inform and shape one another. As a result, the viewing of performative documentaries may feel unsettling, troubled (and yet inspired) by the problematization of narrative structure and the uneasy correspondence between form and content.

The Act of Killing for example, begins as an investigation of the mass killings perpetrated by Indonesian death squads in the late twentieth century and with an in-depth phenomenological look into the memories of these experiences. But then the documentary rapidly shifts into a performative mode as the former killers are asked by the producers to stage a creative re-enactment of the events. As the documentary becomes a film about the process of making a film out of these re-enactments, *The Act of Killing* opens a window onto the difficult legacies of the persecution of communists, thus vividly affirming the highly situated, nuanced personal perspectives on justice, order, and progress by the killers themselves in the context of a reactionary Indonesian political culture. Flashbacks, musical scores, focus on states of mind, and many elements of fictional filmmaking are typical of this style, alongside staples of the ethnographic documentary form such as the interview, observation, and social contextualization.

The fifth ethnographic documentary style I wish to discuss in this section is the *observational*. The observational style—the most common style of anthropological film—has been closely associated with classic disciplinary concerns and realist ethnographic practice (see Barbash and Taylor 1997; Grimshaw 2011; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; MacDougall 2000; Ruby 2000). It is a very controversial style as its distinct elements have, without a doubt, contributed to its limited popularity among broader audiences. Observational films privilege first and foremost the seemingly unmediated exposure of naturally unfolding action and interaction through extremely long camera takes, exclusively diegetic sound, and the absent presence of the camera and filmmaker. Observational films feature limited or no close-ups, no voiceover, infrequent use of title cards, and a keen preoccupation with respecting the chronology of events as they unfold in reality. "Characters" are not sought or exploited, subject matter experts are absent, and rather than through interviews human subjects are portrayed communicating with one another or acting alone, as if filming were not taking place. Shooting is unpreoccupied with aesthetic concerns. The subject matter is ordinary, unglorified, taken-for-granted behavior. Editing, ideally, is merely intended as splicing shots together. There is no argumentation, no re-enactments, and no clear narrative arc.

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The observational approach is a fly-on-the-wall approach to ethnography and filming that realist ethnographers would promptly recognize as the prototypical ideal of objective research and that constructivists would immediately condemn as utter pretence (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009). It is also a style that deeply violates—for better or for worse—contemporary cinematic and televisual format conventions for entertainment and that, therefore, receives very little attention by large distributors. Indeed, unsurprisingly, I could not find any examples of films shot in this style on TV channels, Netflix, or iTunes. Lucien Castaing-Taylor's critically acclaimed *Sweetgrass*, discussed in detail by Grimshaw (2011), constitutes a prime example of this style, as well as many films by David MacDougall (2000).

The Emergence of a Dominant Style: The Participatory

In contemporary qualitative research, *participatory* tends to refer to decolonized approaches to knowledge creation, especially as they actively involve research participants in the stages of research design, information gathering, and collaborative analysis and reporting (see Özerdem and Bowd 2013). The term *participatory* does not denote that approach in the particular context of this paper. Though there exist profoundly collaborative approaches to popular documentary filmmaking (see, e.g., the YouTube crowd-sourced film *Life in a Day*) and to academic ethnographic filmmaking (see Gubrium and Harper 2014 for a review, and the work of Charles Menzies,[6] Claudia Mitchell,[7] and Matthew Durrington,[8] among many others, for examples) "participatory" here refers to a documentary style produced through the filmmaker's *participant observation* into the subject matter he/she aims to understand (Nichols 2010). This is an important point in our discussion of what makes a film ethnographic. Because of their necessary reliance on participant observation, I contend, all participatory documentaries are inevitably ethnographic—though we may suggest that they vary in terms of *degree* of the "ethnographicness" of their involvement in participants' lives and social worlds, in terms of the depth and breadth of their contextualizations, and in terms of the sociocultural significance of the "research questions" underlying their documentation.

At the center of the participatory style lies the interview (Nichols 2010). Interviews with members of the lifeworlds portrayed in the film, with the central character(s) of a story, and/or with the protagonists of an event serve as crucial human encounters between filmmaker and participants. These encounters are not meant to be objective, neutral, unbiased, fact-finding, systematic procedures. Rather they are—as is common in fieldwork—organically emergent, deeply situated meetings between social actors whose

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copresence deeply shapes each other's identity and conduct. These encounters are shaped and altered by power imbalances, differing agendas and interests, fleeting emotions, and by language, class, gender, ethnicity, and many more variables. The act of filming allows for these encounters to come to life before the spectator's eyes and ears in all their partiality, contingency, and complexity.

Beside interviews, participatory ethnographic documentaries feature other material, most commonly variable quantities of *verité* footage (shot during periods of nonparticipant or participant observation), dialogue, B-roll, and—when appropriate—archival footage and extra-diegetic sound. Participatory documentaries may also contain graphics, still photography, and interviews with subject matter experts who are asked to provide commentary, opinions, contextual information, and interpretation. It is increasingly rare for participant documentaries to feature voiceover, so filmmakers often rely on sparsely used title cards to convey information otherwise cumbersome to get across (see Bernard 2011). Participatory documentaries do not typically make use of reenacted or staged behavior; however, at times the presence of the camera may generate individual or collective behavior or events that would not have taken place had a camera not been there.

Participatory ethnographic documentaries are recorded and edited in radically different ways than their observational ethnographic counterparts. Shots range the whole gamut of the filmmaker's arsenal: extreme close-ups, medium close-ups, medium shots, long, and extremely long shots. Various camera angles are utilized not only to convey different perspectives and impressions, but at times also to play with light and in order to display visually arresting imagery. Shots and countershots are utilized to give editing continuity, and the nature of cuts at times can resemble the conventions of Hollywood film. Also in contrast to observational films, which move slowly, participatory-styled documentaries make frequent use of shorter takes and faster sequences. Editing is also conducted to maximize the narrative potential of film, aiming to build tension and achieve some kind of resolution at the end (see Bernard 2011).

As will become apparent in the next section, participatory documentaries can be quite different from one another. Some encounters between filmmakers and participants can generate forms of individual and group expression that are very typical of performative documentaries, for example. Some participatory filmmakers' cinematographic and lyrical sensitivity can make their work feel almost poetic. And some filmmakers may be so transparently present in their documentaries to almost slide into the reflexive tradition. While the "voice" of the participatory filmmaker always emerges through the voices of the participants, at times his/her voice can emerge "from direct, personal

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involvement in the events that unfold" (Nichols 2010, 118–19). In this sense, reflexivity in participatory ethnographic filmmaking may not be as explicit as it is in the reflexive style, but the presentation of narrative and contextual information typical of these films occurs in such a way that it becomes obvious for the viewer that documentary "truth" is negotiated through contingent relationships and the filmmaker's own situatedness in the field. We may then occasionally hear a filmmaker asking questions on or off screen, hear participants addressing the crew, see cameras or sound-recording equipment on frame, or we may be even told explicitly that there is a personal story behind the filmmaker's compelling choice to portray a subject.

From this description of the characteristics of participatory ethnographic films, it should be easy to understand why these documentaries are so common. Because they leave their subject matter relatively open to the audience's interpretation, they avoid the critiques—for example, of being pushy, preachy, patronizing, manipulative, and pedantic—normally leveled at expository films. Because they focus in depth on slices of human life, they succeed at making the ordinary unfamiliar and at making the exotic mundane just like observational films do, but by increasing the pace, by focusing on human characters, and by building a narrative arc they avoid being as pretentiously objective and distant as their observational counterparts—and they succeed in being more easily entertaining as well. And because they introduce audiences to filmmaking as a creative process, they are reflexive and performative, but without indulging in the more self-consciously avant-garde tendencies of some performative and autobiographical films. Also, participatory videos nowadays make increasingly effective use of "poetic" imagery, as thanks to HD digital technology it has generally become a lot easier and cheaper for their makers to produce aesthetically sensitive content.

Learning from the Participatory Documentary Style

Now that a somewhat detailed landscape of nonacademic ethnographic film has been painted, let us reflect on what documentary politics and aesthetics of representation have got to teach to the rest of us, scholarly ethnographic writers. In what follows, I will outline four qualities of the participatory style from which, I argue, we can learn a great deal: its intimacy, detail-orientation, narrativity, and sensuousness. While these qualities are not unusual in ethnographic writing and qualitative research writ large, participatory-style ethnographic film has the potential to inspire us to write better, and perhaps somewhat differently, without losing sight of our interpretive and analytical responsibilities toward our academic audiences.

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Intimacy

Participatory documentaries have a unique revealing power. Seemingly without mediation (although nothing is possible without mediation), participatory ethnographic films allow us to *see* and *hear* a film's participants vividly. Thus, participatory film enables us to listen to people's voices in their tone, language, accent, pitch, rhythm, and speaking volume. Furthermore, audio recording allows us to hear diegetic sound, like the ambient elements of a soundscape, noise, and silence, as well as extra-diegetic sound like special sound effects or a musical score. The camera also lets us see a film's participants' faces, bodies, countenance, poise, attire, and demeanor. In this sense, the audiovisual immediacy of participatory ethnographic film has a tremendous power to facilitate the way we, as audiences, can relate to distant human beings and thus feel for their plight and quests, share common emotions, or perhaps even grow dislike and antipathy toward them (MacDougall 2006). In writing, we can use language to describe components of a field site, and through words we may be able to paint the portrait of a place and its people. But the film/video camera has an undoubtable advantage in the way it grants us iconically and indexically richer visual and aural access to the world. As MacDougall (2006, 5–6) observes, "appearance is knowledge, of a kind. Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable. Visual knowledge (as well as other forms of sensory knowledge) provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people."

Examples of the participatory style's profound visual and aural intimacy can be found in two recent productions: *Up the* Yangtze, 2009 Genie Award-winner, and Michael Glawogger's 2011 film *Whores' Glory. Up the Yangtze* depicts the experiences of young Chinese men and women working aboard luxury cruises traveling on the Yangtze River, in the shadows of the controversial Three Gorges Dam. The film focuses in particular on the trials and tribulations of teenager Yu Shui, who leaves her indigent parents' home for the first time to go to work, and Chen Bo Yu, an overconfident urban young man whose hubris causes him to be laid off at the end of the first working season. *Whores' Glory* similarly gives us a peek behind the stages of an underpaid, underprivileged, and often-exploited occupation: prostitution. Shot in Thailand, Bangladesh, and Mexico, the film's modest protagonists (the women) and understated antagonists (the johns) succeed one another on the screen as they go nonchalantly about their business, reflecting on the mundaneity of their day-to-day commodified sexual practices, and narrating their experiences with a great deal of introspection. Both films, subtitled and shot without voiceover, are profoundly (at times, shockingly so) descriptive of the embodied activities and experiences of their participants, yielding a remarkably thick description—or as MacDougall (2006, 49) would put it, "depiction" of coherent fragments of their lives.

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It is strange to hear scholars say, as some are occasionally wont to do (e.g., Hastrup 1992), that the visual is a "thin" mode of scholarly communication. To prove the contrary, one simply has to try and describe thickly, using words, even as little as five minutes of the footage of films like *Whores' Glory* and *Up the Yangtze*. Indeed it should be clear to anyone that audiovisual recordings are far superior to ethnographic writing in terms of descriptive "transparency" (see Geertz 1988). The typical journal article, eight thousand words or so in length, contains "data" sections that normally amount to no more than 30–40 percent of the total length of a paper. But as we all know, these three thousand words or so only accommodate for about half a dozen excerpts from interviews or field notes. To boot, these passages are generally made subservient to introductory remarks that lay the context for a quote and even summarize it or paraphrase it before or after displaying it. Such strategy often renders observation very thin and "faceless" (MacDougall 2006, 32–38) privileging telling over showing and the voice of the researcher over the participants', thus even accidentally inviting readers to skip straight to the conceptual and theoretical material (see Stoller 1997). In contrast, ethnographic film showcases participants' words, faces, and bodies (see MacDougall 2006, 16–30) in great depth—as this material often comprises 90 percent or more of a participatory documentary. If transcribed and annotated, a participatory documentary's ethnographic content would be ten or twenty times that of a journal article, and probably roughly the same as that of a monograph. The lesson for us here is then simple: inspired by the way film describes thickly, I believe we should strive to let faces and bodies be seen more, and voices be heard in their own right, less mediated by scholarly speech.

Detail Orientation

Another key characteristic of participatory documentaries is their attention to ethnographic detail. By "detail orientation," I refer to the way in which certain shots and sequences advance a documentary's plot by functioning as strategic distractions from the main story. Attention to these "distractions"—sidebar ideas or subplots—reveals the distinctiveness of the human and/or nonhuman characters of a narrative by shedding light on seemingly peripheral but unique details. Detail orientation may be materialized through backstories, a focus on parallel events, or—visually—through attention-grabbing close-ups and extreme close-ups of objects, places, and/or individuals' actions. Attention to these details breaks up the pace of narration and argumentation, thus serving as a pacing mechanism or momentary rhythm-shifter, allowing the viewer to become distracted, but simultaneously refocused. Orientation to detail can therefore organize and order a film's structure in subtle and nuanced ways.

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La Camioneta is a 2012 documentary examining the contemporary transnational mobilities of material objects and people within the North and Central American geo-social context. Filmed to tell the journey of a used American school bus—as it is driven from a Texas auction lot to a Guatemalan car garage, and later onto the country's rural and urban roads—the documentary winds up shedding light on organized crime's threats to public transport in Guatemala. Though detail-orientation pervades the film in its entirety, one sequence in particular—during which the yellow school bus is painstakingly repainted and redesigned through the scrupulous artistry of the employees of a garage specialized in this business—beautifully serves to connote the material and symbolic transformation of the bus's identity and its life passage to a true *camioneta*. The filmmakers could have easily edited out the garage sequence, as it is relatively peripheral to the story's emphasis on hard-hitting issues of mobility, safety, and order, but through attention to these details the bus comes to assume a subjectivity of its own, embodying and materializing the key turn of the story.

A similarly profitable attention to detail is evident in another recent participatory documentary: 2012 Oscar nominee, *Five Broken Cameras.* The film is a highly reflexive, even autoethnographic, account of the social upheavals unfolding in Bil'in—a West Bank town affected by the Israeli West Bank barrier and settlement process. Though the film's true concern is with land-rights, occupation, protest, and state power, it is a seemingly peripheral detail that structures the story's organization into five distinct acts. The detail is the misfortune of farmer-turned-filmmaker Emad Burnat, who in 2005 bought a camcorder to tape the birth of his youngest son only to later see it destroyed—and later on four more cameras meet the same fate—in a street battle over the following five years of social unrest. Throughout the film, the periodical destruction of the video cameras used to chronicle the Israeli military's relentless crushing of Palestinian protest becomes symbolic of the futility of Emad Burnat's and his neighbors' struggles to save their town's olive groves from the barrier's construction. The breaking of the cameras further symbolizes loss of hope, as with the death of each camera many of Burnat's friends and neighbors are arrested and shot.

When used intelligently, as in the two films above, the strategy of bringing attention to seemingly irrelevant details can make a film more memorable and its characters and events more unique. In contrast to film, this is unfortunately one of the least-often practiced strategies in ethnographic writing. Journal-length articles in particular are notorious for monotonously driving at the main argument and never leading astray from it, thus unfolding without letting events and characters breathe, and without much or any space at all for interesting narrative detours. In part, this is due to journals' limiting word counts, but in larger part—I believe—this happens because as scholars and even as ethnographers we are

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typically praised for our theoretical, conceptual, and substantial contributions, and not so much for telling a compelling and memorable story with attention to detail. If we wish to learn from ethnographic film, however, detail-orientation is something we can easily integrate into our fieldwork and writing.

Narrativity

A documentary is first and foremost a story (Barbash and Taylor 1997; Bernard 2011; Nichols 2010), so the key question we must ask is, what story does a film want to tell, and even more importantly how, precisely, does it create a sense of narrative? Participatory documentaries—much like narrative ethnography (see Czarniawska 2004)—want to tell the stories of ordinary people as they go about their day-to-day life. Their key distinctive style lies in telling stories through nothing but people's words and their actions, and it is in this sense that they are quite different from written ethnographies. As writers, through our own chosen words we can retell an interview, recount an observation, paraphrase a research participant's experience, synthesize material or expand upon it, and thus assemble a plot that is only partially dependent on the precise form of our empirical data. The writer has endless creative analytic and rhetorical strategies and sources to choose from. In contrast, participatory filmmakers uninterested in voiceover do not have this luxury; the only material they have available to create a story is words as they were exactly spoken and images as they were shot. If a narrative element is not "on tape," it cannot be depicted. Telling a story through participatory film is thus an act of editing already-existing pieces together in order to patch a coherent whole. More than writing could ever be, the work of a participatory documentarian is that of a true storytelling *bricoleur*.

2010 Academy Award Nominee *Which Way Home*, for example, tells the stories of Central American children as they attempt to immigrate illegally into the United States. The filmmakers follow kids as young as nine-year-old Olga and Freddy as they travel without their parents to America from Honduras, jumping trains and struggling to stay a step ahead of law-enforcement authorities, gangsters, and petty thieves. Through the footage of their accounts and their actions, director Rebecca Cammisa assembles a story of hope and despair, courage and disappointment, and ultimately a piece of participant observation set amid transnational political and economic forces and the ties of border-crossing family and friendship networks. Olga, Freddy, Jose—a ten-year-old from El Salvador—and teenage Honduran Kevin in the end meet different fates, which the documentary compels us to follow in a suspenseful mode worthy of the most captivating novel.

Similarly built around a sense of hope and aspiration are the journeys of the Russian teenage girls recruited by a modeling agency to work in Japan and

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chronicled by sociologist/filmmaker David Redmon. Redmon begins his observation at a regional modeling competition held in Siberia and organized by a former American model by the name of Ashley. Confident of her potential for success, Ashley recruits thirteen-year-old Nadya—a girl from a humble rural background—and a few of her newly made friends. Redmon's camera follows Nadya's move to Tokyo, where she struggles with adjusting to a foreign culture, being away from home for the first time, and with the harsh demands and modest paybacks of her uncertain occupation. As the story evolves, *Girl Model* stimulates mixed emotions in its viewers, pushing us to relate to the hopeful plight of the young girls while simultaneously prompting us to ask whether the price they pay to be successful is personally and socially worthwhile. As the story reaches its end, Redmon and codirector Sabin hint that Nadya's story will continue, maybe with different protagonists and different outcomes, but with recurring elements of deception, mistrust, poverty, aspiration, the pursuit of wealth and fame, and ultimately the bodily commodification of many young women in Russia, Japan, and elsewhere.

There are key elements of style, Stoller (2007, 180) finds, "that are necessary if ethnographers want their work to be read by a wide range of readers over a long period of time." The first is locality, or a sense of place. The places journeyed through by *Girl Model*'s and *Which Way Home*'s protagonists, and vicariously by us, are haunting and hard to forget. The second element, Stoller (2007, 180) continues, are the narrative events that reveal characters' identity, personality, and humanness. Through their informants' stories, ethnographers can "grapple with the things most fundamentally human—love and loss, fear and courage, fate and compassion—deep issues that connect readers [and viewers] to the people they encounter in ethnographic texts." Participatory ethnographic documentaries remind us writers that the power of a well-told story lies in the tension it builds, in how it compels us to wish to see a narrative end and yet continue at the same time. Films like these two sensitize our creative and sociological imagination to the importance of weaving stories that speak to the critical issues of our time and the timeless human condition, bringing us to wonder about the personal and the biographical and their porous boundaries with the political and historical. "In the end," Stoller (2007, 190) concludes in exhorting ethnographers to learn from the cinematographic imagination of ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, "it is the texture of the story that marks our contribution to the world."

Sensuousness

An increasing number of scholars today advocate for a more sensuous scholarship that is produced through, and for, the full gamut of human sensory

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experience (e.g., Pink 2009; Stoller 1997). Sensuous ethnographies are interpretive and phenomenological undertakings that put a strong premium on the meaningfulness of sensory experiences, the significance of the skillful practices through which we make sense of the world, and the importance of aesthetically rich expressions through which lifeworlds are made and represented. Film is an ideal medium for sensuous ethnographic practice (MacDougall 2006; Pink 2009; Stoller 1992). Like the most exquisitely written ethnographies, participatory documentaries are ideally equipped to animate sensory dimensions of lifeworlds through their carnal depictions of human characters and their embodied actions. But even more than writing can hope to be, film is ideal for showing complex visual and aural realities.

Film is a visual and aural medium, but it is also indirectly adequate for depicting sensations of touch, smell, taste, pain, movement, and balance. As Marks (2000, 213) observes, "characters are shown eating, making love, and so forth, and we viewers identify with their activity. We salivate or become aroused on verbal and visual cue. Beyond this it is common for cinema to evoke sense experience through intersensory links: sounds may evoke textures, sights may evoke smells." It is by relating to characters' sensations that we feel not only for them, but also with them. In the participatory documentary *The Boxing Girls of Kabul*, for example, we learn about the competitive ambitions of a small group of young Afghani women training to become Olympic-level boxers. As the camera follows them in their training centers and tournament arenas, the sounds of grunts and punches and the sights of fighting bodies evoke feelings of pain, the stench of sweat, and the violent contact of hands and faces. As the young women learn to fight and defend themselves amid a broader conservative misogynistic culture that deeply oppresses them, their bodily sensations and their willpower to push back hegemonic forces echo the feelings of many other Afghani women who are silenced and made invisible outside the home by orthodox religious norms and thereby boxing becomes a metaphor for protest, rebellion, and social change.

The flavors of food and the sensations associated with its procurement, production, and sharing are important dimensions of the human condition. Film cannot allow us to taste food, but it can enliven the way eating can be vicariously experienced and understood. In *Vanishing Point*, we learn about both old and contemporary ways of hunting and fishing "country foods" in the Canadian and Greenlandic Arctic. Told from the eyes and voice of Inuit elder Navarana, the film takes us westward across the Arctic Sea as the protagonist travels from Northern Greenland to Canada's Baffin Island to learn about modern life there. As Navarana learns that the descendants of her distant ancestors enjoy the flavors of the same wild foods as Greenland Inuit do, but that they practice hunting and fishing through gas-guzzling motorized

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boats and rifles—as opposed to the more traditional ways practiced by her people—she begins to reflect on the future of traditional knowledge and development and the fate of circumpolar Inuit.

Stoller (1997) argues that so many conventionally written ethnographies leave a bad taste in the reader's mouth, but that through a richer variety of ingredients and a greater sensitivity toward their own sensory experiences, sensuous ethnographers can aim to prepare tasteful servings of knowledge. Films like *Vanishing Point*—through which we get to feel what it is like to catch migratory birds with a net and unpluck their feathers for a tasty snack, and through which we get to vicariously taste the flavor of the cold blubber of a freshly fished Narwhal—remind us that the power that sets fieldwork apart from other research traditions lies less in its transferrable generalizations and its conceptualization of generic social process, and rather more in how it seduces us to travel alongside its protagonists and experience a raw sense of life together with them. Abstractions matter greatly, of course, but ethnographic film reminds us that the longer-lasting flavors of an experience are those that carve sensuous traces on our bodies.

Conclusion: Sharing Ethnographic Knowledge Widely

The purpose of this paper has been ingeniously simple. Even though as ethnographers most of us are quite sensitive to communicating well—arguably much more sensitive than most other academics—I believe, we still have much to gain from learning how to reach wider audiences. By understanding what makes nonacademic ethnographic documentaries popular—at least more popular than most of our written articles and monographs could ever be—and therefore by understanding the nature of their subject matter and style, we can improve the way we write. By improving the way we write I am not suggesting that we start appealing to the minimum common denominator (whatever that might be) and "dumb down" our work. I am not positing, at all, that we should neglect our theoretical and conceptual responsibilities in search of a good story, or that we limit ourselves to choosing hip research topics that have the potential to capture the interest of wider audiences. Far from it. As someone who has been and continues to be directly involved in the production of ethnographic film I am also fully aware of the ethical, institutional, logistical, and political hurdles that popularization of academic work implies. Here I simply wish to make the argument that a greater sensitivity to elements of style and to strategic distribution can make ethnological knowledge more visible and publicly relevant—an argument also made very eloquently by many others such as Stoller (1997) and Becker (2007). If we want our work to have

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an impact—whether that is to stimulate the sociological imagination, raise awareness, or lead to social and cultural change—then we have nothing to gain by preaching to a selected choir of converts and by not occupying a more meaningful presence in the public sphere. The successes of our nonacademic ethnographer colleagues who specialize in documentary film, I have articulated, therefore have a great deal to teach us. As I have dedicated a great deal of attention to subject matter and style, I now want to conclude with a brief reflection on knowledge mobilization.

The typical academic CV lists evidence of scholarly research performance in the form of books, articles, chapters, and presentations. Little does it matter how many people read our work and how deeply they enjoy it, or not. As a result, scholars have learned to consider their work to be all done once a piece of writing is accepted for publication by a journal or press. Some academics make it a point of submitting work to widely read (still, mostly within the ivory tower only) publishers, but many do not, at least not always. An article or book that is read by more than one thousand individuals is—in our professional world—to be considered a success. In contrast, an ethnographic film available on Netflix or iTunes is streamed, rented, or downloaded by hundreds of thousands or even millions. The fact that filmmakers with some undergraduate or graduate training in ethnography can reach audiences hundreds of times bigger than we "professional ethnographers" can be a tough pill to swallow. Provided that we do have reasons to care, and I believe that we do (see Vannini 2012; Vannini and Mosher 2013), what *can* we do? Briefly, there are at least five things we can do.

Firstly, we can tone down our own arrogance and view popular productions such as nonacademic ethnographic films not as bastardizations of our mighty research standards, but as worthy ethnographic accomplishments in their own. Doing so will allow us to view these productions with a sense of wonder and a newly whetted appetite for learning from them. Secondly, we can continue to experiment with style—and as reviewers and teachers be more accepting of others' experimentations—in order to become better (i.e., more intimate, detail-oriented, narrative, sensuous) writers. Fail we may at times, but hopefully we will learn to fail better. Thirdly, we can become more sensitive to outreach. This can prompt us to try and reach wider audiences through new strategies for giving access to our traditional media, and through the utilization of new media altogether (magazines, social media, popular presses, blog aggregates, and open-access channels are only a few of many options). Fourthly, we can strive to teach differently. Many filmmakers whose documentaries garner popular success have at least some training in the social sciences, yet extremely few social science departments teach their students how to use modes of communication other than writing. Adding technical

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audiovisual ethnography courses to social scientific programs' curricula seems almost mandatory at a time when young students are almost "naturally" literate in visual and aural media from a young age.

And finally, engaging in collaborations with professional filmmakers as consultants, cowriters, or coproducers would seem to be a most fruitful and viable alternative for all ethnographers, even those without any training in audiovisual productions (though, it is never too late to self-train by heading to the library). Bemoaning the chokehold of large Hollywood production and distribution companies over movie theatres or the demise of ethnographic TV series like *Disappearing World* as an excuse for not trying is a poor one. More than ever before hybrid TV makes it possible—not easy, but at least possible—to reach a wide, diverse, documentary-savvy, and potentially socially conscious audience thirsty for entertaining and intelligent ethnographic content.[9] To boot, filmmakers know that academic ethnographers can contribute not only factual and methodological knowledge to a documentary production, but also serve as gatekeepers, grant some access to funding, and lend credibility to a project. In the end, whether we just decide to write, or film, or do both we should keep in mind that it is in fact nothing but "the contour of our stories that etch our traces in the world" (Stoller 2007, 180).

Appendix

Filmography

5 Broken Cameras. Directed by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi. 2011. Alegria Productions.

180° South. Directed by Chris Malloy. 2010. Magnolia Pictures.

Baraka. Directed by Ron Fricke. 1992. Magidison Films.

Dead Birds. Directed by Robert Gardner. 1963. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources.

Forest of Bliss. Directed by Robert Gardner. 1986. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources.

Girl Model. Directed by David Redmon and Ashley Sabin. 2011. Produced by David Redmon and Ashley Sabin.

Happy People. Directed by Werner Herzog and Dmitry Vasyukov. 2010. Studio Babelsberg.

Hotel Rwanda. Directed by Terry George. 2004. United Artists.

La Camioneta. Directed by Mark Kendall. 2012. Ek Balam Producciones.

Les Maitres Fous. Directed by Jean Rouch. 1955. Produced by Jean Rouch.

Life in a Day. Directed by Kevin MacDonald. 2011. Distributed by National Geographic Films and YouTube.

Manufactured Landscapes. Directed by Jennifer Baichwal. 2006. Foundry Films and National Film Board of Canada.

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Nanook of the North. Directed by Robert Flahery. 1922. Distributed by Pathé Exchange.
Samsara. Directed by Ron Fricke. 2011. Bali Film Centre.
Sweetgrass. Directed by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. 2009. Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab.
The Act of Killing. Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer. Final Cut for Real.
The Ax Fight. Directed by Tim Asch. 1975. Produced by Tim Asch and Napoleon Chagnon.
The Boxing Girls of Kabul. Directed by Ariel Nasr. 2012. National Film Board of Canada.
The Hunters. Directed by John Marshall and Robert Gardner. 1957. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources.
Traffic. Directed by Steven Soderbergh. 2000. Bedford Falls Productions.
Up the Yangtze. Directed by Yung Chang. Produced by Eye Steel Film and National Film Board of Canada.
Vanishing Point. Directed by Stephen Smith and Julia Szucs. National Film Board of Canada.
¡Vivan Las Antipodas! Directed by Victor Kossakovsky. 2011. Arte.
Which Way Home. Directed by Rebecca Cammisa. 2009. Documentress Films.
Whores' Glory. Directed by Michael Glawogger. 2011. Lotus Film.

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Notes

1. Unless I need to distinguish between the two, I use film and video interchangeably. This is because the two media have become, in many ways, more similar to one another as time has progressed. Video, for instance, has greatly improved in quality with the onset of High Definition. Prior to the arrival of HD, film was believed to be superior in quality to video but more difficult and cumbersome to shoot. Now film has become easier to work with, and therefore the distinctions between film and video have become minimal (at least insofar as the scope of this article goes).
2. Not all documentaries are ethnographic. In this article, I use the expressions "ethnographic documentary" and "documentary" to specify its precise referents (i.e., ethnographic and nonethnographic films).
3. Throughout this paper, I refer to popular (i.e., non-university-based) filmmakers who make ethnographic documentaries as "ethnographic filmmakers."

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Whenever I refer to their academic counterparts, I use the adjectives "academic" or "university-based." Because the purpose of the article is to examine the relevance of the former filmmakers, rather than the latter, I do not offer here a review of academic ethnographic filmmakers' work. The interested reader can easily find some of these productions through journals like the *Journal of Video Ethnography* or reviews and opinion pieces published in journals such as *Visual Studies, Visual Anthropology*, and *Visual Anthropology Review*. A growing catalogue can also be found at the online Harvard University Sensory Ethnography Lab: http://sel.fas.harvard.edu/works.html.

4. Take, e.g., my own work on off-grid living (Vannini and Taggart 2014), which was produced in written form and in video. Despite the fact that writing and video afford different ways of telling a story, in the end the narrative was really the same. Both ethnographic video and writing aim to describe and interpret the same lifeworld by way of the same field encounters, by way of the same balance of personal and social–political–environmental information, and by way of a very similar organizational scheme.
5. Films may teach us volumes about theory and conceptual issues indirectly, that is, by allowing us to reflect on theory and concepts through their subject matter. But film is a visual and narrative medium and it is not ideal for the level of abstract reasoning required to develop theoretical ideas.
6. Menzies's YouTube Channel can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/user/crmenzies.
7. Claudia Mitchell's website shows several of her and her students' projects: http://participatory-cultureslab.com/.
8. See, e.g., the *Anthropology by the Wire* project: http://anthropology-bythewire.com/.
9. To be sure, hybrid TV gatekeepers still play a very important and powerful role in determining what films will be distributed and made available—something about which we, as both viewers and possibly content producers, still know too little.

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Author Biography

Phillip Vannini is Canada Research Chair in Public Ethnography and Professor in the School of Communication & Culture at Royal Roads University. He is author/editor of a dozen books, the latest of which is "*Off the Grid: Re-Assembling Domestic Life*" (Routledge, 2014), for which he has also produced a documentary film (see: www.lifeoffgrid.ca)

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