

Creating Shared Experience – Sensory Ethnography and Collaborative Filmmaking
Bauhaus-Universität Weimar

Sharing Difference/Understanding Media: Cinematic Research, Visual Anthropology and Ecologies of Communication in the 1960s

Henning Engelke

In a paper delivered at the 1966 American Anthropological Association Conference, anthropologist Allison Jablonko contemplated the possibility of editing ethnographic films along the pace of “movement phrases” of another culture. Deviating from Western cinematic rules, such editing might, as she assumes, bring about “experiences of culture shock.” At the same time, Jablonko envisioned an aesthetics of empathy facilitating a profound “cross-cultural experience.” Jablonko’s considerations emerged from her analysis of the extensive footage she and her husband Marek Jablonko had recorded during their fieldwork among the Maring of Papua New Guinea two years before. The primary objective of her study was to isolate, through microanalysis of the filmed footage, culturally specific movement patterns and to investigate their role in interaction/communication and ecological adaptation. Film aesthetics was not a central concern. But the method nevertheless required, as her remarks indicate, reflections on filmic structure and cinematic experience.

Jablonko’s focus on movement patterns in a single Non-Western culture was rather unique at its time. Her interest in how cultural and physical environments interact with bodily behavior, perception and cognition, however, resonated with broader ideas in such diverse fields as visual anthropology, psychology, sociology, communication studies, and film and media studies. Film played an important role in these studies, not only as a tool for the recording and indexicalization of interaction behavior, but also in conveying experiential qualities of “otherness.” As in Jablonko’s project, such research often also reflected back on the medium of film itself and, more broadly, modern media in general. The communication scholar and film teacher Sol Worth directly addressed this issue in his research on perception and film structure. On the one hand, he sought to gain insights into how cultural and social environments shape perception through analyzing films made by college students, youths in Harlem and, in his most well known project, Navajo Native Americans. On the other hand, the resulting films, which Worth termed “bio-documentaries”, became important elements in his theoretical research on the semiotics of “film language.” Similarly, the anthropologist and media theorist Edmund Carpenter experimented with film to evoke a sense of “acoustic space”, which he had found, in his ethnographic fieldwork, to be of central importance for the perceptual world of Inuit communities. In Carpenter’s collaboration with media theorist Marshall McLuhan, acoustic space turned into a powerful metaphor for electronic media.

This paper compares Jablonko’s, Worth’s and Carpenter’s approaches to film, shared experience and perceptual ecologies in the context of changing research policies and epistemologies of the visual in the US during the early 1960s. It considers how these projects of cinematic research and research on cinema/media redefined, in their own different ways, ideas of indexicality, interrelatedness, cinematic experience and “otherness.” It moreover seeks to situate the project’s cinematic methods and epistemological premises within larger contexts of Cold War science politics. If shared experience could become closely related to understanding media, this was, as I will argue, the result of various intersecting, and sometimes contradictory, political and scholarly interests, technological imaginaries, epistemological shifts and cinematic practices.