

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

SuperManc, SuperMilanese and SuperSwede: filming participatory superhero performances in ethnographic research on European urbanity

Johannes Sjöberg

This presentation will explore how creative practice can be applied in ethnographic research and films on urban worldmaking. Drawing on Edie and Victor Turner's use of ethnographic performance (1988) as a starting point the study will suggest how applied theatre practice (Boal 1995, Thompson 2003) can be combined with intersubjective fieldwork research and projective improvisation in ethnographic film-making (Loizos 1993, Rouch 2003, Sjöberg 2008) to get access to the imaginary realm of ethnographic research on the future.

Over the past two years I have convened laboratories as part of FAN (Future Anthropologies Network) at the bi-annual meetings of EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists) in Milan 2016 and Stockholm 2018. I have invited anthropologists attending the conference to conduct tentative research with local participants as they create their own superhero personas to reflect on urban change in their environment participating in the SuperMilanese, SuperSwede and the (forthcoming) SuperManc workshops.

The attending anthropologists conduct interviews with the participants that reflect on issues in relation to their urban environment. The participants create their own superhero alter egos by painting murals on the basis of the interviews and by enacting them. The imaginary supermen and superwomen deal with issues of urban change through their superhero abilities, sidekicks and tools etc. E.g. one woman in Milan transformed herself into a super version of the Pied Piper of Hamelin that would bring her fellow citizens out into the streets from their TV sets to reinvigorate the dying city atmosphere of Milan. A Swedish participant was so annoyed by the unempathetic street attitudes of Stockholm, that she created a superwoman with dancing legs to avoid people walking into her and a comfort cloud that would keep her feel safe. The murals and performances function as sounding boards for the anthropologists as they ask the participants to reflect on them in order to inspire and develop the ethnographic fieldwork research. The workshops were created as part of laboratories on worldmaking and activism in relation to anthropology, that I convened with fellow FAN members Andrew Irving, Magda Kazubowski-Houston, Sarah Pink, Juan Salazar and facilitator Alexandra D'Onofrio. The workshops were video recorded and will be edited for the ethnographic film SuperManc (forthcoming).

The talk will provide a critical analysis of the filmed workshops with the intention to develop ethnographic participatory methods that could give access to the imagination of the fieldwork informants, to be used in addition to conventional ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews. The presentation will build on and expand my previous research on the performance in the ethno-fiction films of Jean Rouch (Sjöberg 2008, 2009, 2011). I will also refer to my research on ethno science fiction (Sjöberg 2017) in which participants of the ethnographic fieldwork create their own science fictions to explore the gap between scientific predictions of their local areas and their imagination about their future, especially in relation to climate change, and my journal article on An Epistemology of Play (Sjöberg 2018) in which I bring together the theories of Boal (1995), Caillois (1958), Fink (1968), Huizinga (1938) and Moreno (with Fox, 1987) to critically explore how the liminal space of the 'play world' could be applied in ethnographic research as 'negotiated' in the 'fieldplay' between ethnographer and participants. The talk will also make references to my professional background in theatre improvisation and ethnographic film-making, and current work with practice-based research in anthropology, media and performance at the The University of Manchester.

