

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

On Intimacy and Deceptive Traces in Sensory Ethnography

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The practice of sensory ethnography asserts the centrality of experience in the formation of human knowledge by privileging embodied perception over more story-driven narrative techniques. While indebted to phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, the vision of experience conveyed by works of sensory ethnography emphasize less the relationship between mind and body within an individual than the implications of embodied experience for a social body. Furthermore, vision and other sensorial perceptions are not limited to individual experience, but refracted through that of the implied presence of others, suggesting that the film subject is neither singular nor plural, but rather an intersubjective subject. This is perhaps the quality that led ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall to emphasize cinema's transcultural potential.

Following the so-called pictorial turn of the nineties, some might say anthropology has moved beyond what Lucien Taylor described as the discipline's iconophobia, and yet ethnographically grounded films are still considered secondary to textual modes of knowledge production, suggesting that this prejudice has merely been sublimated. For works of sensory ethnography, this is further compounded by their tendency to dwell on the slippery minutiae of life, or what Malinowski termed "imponderabilia," without pacifying them as data, description, or illustration. Comfort with this approach requires, in the words of John Keats, an ability to remain in the ambiguity of 'half-knowledge', or what he termed a Negative Capability. That said, ambiguity or half-knowledge regarding the nature of the relationship between a film subject and filmmaker is tolerated with difficulty, with legible traces of intimacy typically used as measure of a film's ethnographic value.

To what degree is the apparent intimacy between filmmaker and subject a license for the act of watching? Or does this expectation reveal a fundamental misunderstanding or an unfortunate demand that underestimates both the depth of the film subject as well as the intelligence of audiences? What would it mean for a filmmaker to reveal the deceptive traces of filmmaking for what they are: fragmentary bits of half-knowledge that convey, but can never compete with, what journalist and film critic James Agee called the "cruel radiance" of being? Is there such a thing as balance between voyeuristic desires for revelations about a film subject, on the one hand, and the preservation of mystery and dignity, on the other, and what distance or proximity might this position require? What does this debate tell us about the implicit biases of audiences and critics who make these determinations or demands? In this keynote, I will speak to how these otherwise abstract questions arise from practice—in the field, the editing room, as well as in the screening room with an audience—with specific examples from my fieldwork and body of work in Nepal.