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NEW DIRECTIONS IN PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT: *ETHNOGRAFILM*
AND THE *JOURNAL OF VIDEO*
ETHNOGRAPHY

ABSTRACT

This essay introduces a new journal and film festival, designed to legitimate academic filmmaking through the process of peer review. The Journal of Video Ethnography is the first peer-reviewed journal of academic movies. The Ethnografilm festival, held each April in Paris, is a nonfiction film festival that focuses on bringing academic filmmakers together with documentary filmmakers.

KEYWORDS

Video; film festival; peer review; journal; ethnography.

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The launch of a new journal is unremarkable, perhaps not worthy of note outside the boundaries of an academic field. We hope that the *Journal of Video Ethnography* escapes that fate. Through its linkage with a film festival and its harnessing of peer review, JVE seeks to apportion academic credit for a “new” form of knowledge, the ethnographic video. The journal and *Ethnografilm* festival began with a rambling conversation five years ago that converged on an idea: text-based scholarship is not the only - and often not the best - way of reaching audiences beyond the academy.

So far as we could tell, that was universally acknowledged in our own institutions, requiring at most one word of explanation for those who inquired, “what else is there?” Movies. We can acknowledge the merits of mobile devices, texting, blogs, photos, user-creator interaction, hyperlinks, interactive videos, Ted Talks, Facebook, Twitter, and the myriad, continuous, disruptive innovations of new media and ICTs. But these are details of style, media, and format. The primary alternative paradigm to the communication of knowledge through texts is the communication of understanding through a sequence of images with sound. Why not keep it simple? Movies. What we need to teach, to disseminate, to embrace in the social disciplines of academe involves movies. But let us keep that equally simple. We need to *make* movies.

How can we make movies, so long as the reward system of such disciplines as history, sociology, and philosophy, not to mention interdisciplinary studies such as STS, are rooted in text-based scholarship?

The answer, and the fundamental reason for creating both a film festival and a journal, is peer review. Review of documented contributions by peers—whether research essays, books, proposals, or dissertations—is the primary key to legitimacy in academia, granted assumptive quality in every determination of employment and advancement in the scholarly disciplines. We knew many journals and websites allowed brief videos as addenda or linked supplements to research publications. But we knew of no journal that was devoted exclusively to the publication of original movies by academics. Our gut feeling proved correct.

Both of us had made movies. They had been distributed on the web, or DVDs sent to our friends and fellow academics, screened at various conferences, international meetings, used each term in the classroom. Scott had worked with *National Geographic* and *Discovery Channel*. Shrum had filmed for over a decade in Africa and India. Moving forward in an uncertain terrain, we guessed that working on two tracks might be challenging but more rewarding in the long term. We knew little about the audiovisual content that our students and colleagues were currently creating. We would try to organize a familiar, non-academic institution - a film festival - in an academic way. In parallel, we would initiate an academic institution - a peer-reviewed journal - in a decidedly *non-academic*

fashion. We would solicit and publish our colleague's movies, and do so without text, or at least with minimal text as a non-essential codicil to the main audiovisual material embodied by the published film.

How many movies do scholars make? The first *Ethnografilm* (April 2014) was partly designed to help us answer that question in pragmatic fashion, using modern submission and reviewing tools. It would provide a non-exclusive, but peer-reviewed outlet for viewing. The *Ethnografilm* festival is scheduled annually in April at *Ciné 13 Théâtre* in the Montmartre district of Paris, France. The sponsor of the venue is the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), which has long held joint meetings with the Society for the History of Technology. The primary local partner in Paris, providing logistical support, is the International Social Science Council, founded by UNESCO in 1952.

The most recent estimate suggests nearly 10,000 festivals have been in operation at least once in the past fifteen years and about 3,000 festivals in the past two years (Fellows 2013). What sets *Ethnografilm* apart are two special categories for academics along with similar short and feature categories for documentary filmmakers.

Some ask, should they submit their film in the academic category? Our definition of an academic film is one in which an academic or educator plays a major role (editor, director, producer). In practice, submitters make their own decisions, and their determination may have been made with a feeling that one category might be easier than another. All films were sent out for review. There was no attempt to match content with subject matter specialists, as there is for the journal. We solicit the readers of this journal as reviewers for future festivals—we need you because there were nearly 400 submissions in the first year!

In approaching our first festival, we held the view that documentary filmmakers made “better” films than most academics, but academic filmmakers “know more” about their subject matter than documentarians. In any case, it seemed there would be value in bringing together these two groups of filmmakers, which is precisely what happened at the first *Ethnografilm*. But is there really a distinction between the non-fiction films made by the two groups?

After reviewing hundreds of films, it is fair to say there is often no way to tell the difference, simply by watching. Certainly, some had higher production quality than others, some were first time filmmakers, some students. By the beginning of the Paris festival, there was *no reason to distinguish these categories* in programming. Just as short films were commingled with features, no one knew, or asked, or cared about the distinction between academic films and documentaries. People were there to watch and talk about non-fiction movies.

What constitutes an ethnographic film, or “ethnografilm”? Ethnographic film festivals have been an institution for decades. Many are narrowly anthropological, featuring non-

Western peoples. Our own usage emphasizes the systematic treatment of a subject matter leading to a better understanding of humans and cultures. This includes technological cultures and developments, both historical and contemporary - as one would expect from a festival sponsored by 4S. It is fair to say that filmic treatments of technological practices are given special consideration in the review process, just as certain themes may be highlighted at a particular festival. Just as directors determine whether to submit their movie in the academic category, they are the ones to determine whether their film is "ethnographic." But we rely on reviewers to determine whether a film is sufficiently interesting to be shown. At the first festival, two animated films were selected, as well as one consisting exclusively of stills with narration. As in any academic review process, there are myriad considerations invoked in judgments of quality. Our first festival screened 89 films from 37 countries.

The first issue of the *Journal of Video Ethnography* appeared just days before we finished this essay, in September 2014, following a three-year planning and development period. From the outset we intended JVE to serve as a peer review mechanism for academic films made in the broadest tradition of ethnographic research.

Since the earliest days of ethnographic filmmaking, anthropologists and sociologists who make academic nonfiction films have found their motion picture work relegated to the category of "teaching aids," but until now enjoyed no peer review mechanism capable of conferring on their films and videos the status associated with journal articles or books. The absence of a motion picture credentialing system in academia - particularly in the social sciences - has been particularly vexing for junior level filmmakers trying to "earn points" toward tenure and promotion.

Why did it take so long for a peer review journal of movies to emerge? We can offer several plausible reasons based on our experience of establishing JVE: Insufficient technological capacities, legal impediments, methodological standards, and institutionalized prejudice in academia.

Technology. Even with the Internet in hyperdrive, building an efficient technical infrastructure for JVE's operation as a journal has been challenging. First we acquired the domain name videoethno.com. Then we had to construct a viable website with enough bandwidth and storage space to publish many issues of a video journal, seeking the approval of DePaul University to operate outside of the institution's conventional website system. We needed sufficient storage space to publish and subsequently archive high-definition video files. For this we turned to Vzaar, an online video hosting service. Then came the question of how to organize, manage, and conduct peer reviews. The marketplace of text-based journal support systems offers no turnkey program for managing submissions, reviews, relations with peer reviewers, and decision notification for vid-

eo-based content. So we constructed our own method, which relies on Vimeo.com for submissions, ReviewStudio (a proprietary, secure online venue for commercial video review) for conducting reviews, and email for communicating with submitters and reviewers.

Law. The “publishing” of academic films ushers in a thicket of legal issues. We are fortunate to have a strong working relationship with DePaul University’s Office of General Counsel, whose attorneys strive for the most elegant, efficient, and parsimonious solutions to complex legal issues. The legal foundation of our submission-to-publication sequence is comprised of two principal tenets: submitter affirmation and the publication agreement. Every submitter to JVE must actively affirm the film does not infringe on the IP rights of another. This affirmation requirement effectively places on the submitter all legal liability for intellectual property rights and human subjects compliance and thus preemptively absolves (at least theoretically) DePaul and/or JVE of any legal responsibility that may result from civil, criminal, or administrative claims against the filmmaker.

The JVE “Acceptance Agreement” is a legally binding contract between the filmmaker and the journal. Arguably the most important features of this contract are (1) the provision giving JVE the *non-exclusive* right to publish/exhibit/display the video for a three-year period after which the video may be placed in an offline secure archive for historical, educational, and administrative purposes and (2) the provision stating that “the filmmaker shall retain all other rights, title, and interest in and to the film, including copyright.” JVE encourages the creators of its published content to distribute and exhibit their work whenever and however they see fit. After all, part of our mission entails enhancing the general public’s access to and consumption of ethnographic films. Thus we require only *non-exclusive* exhibition rights. If a filmmaker whose work is published in JVE were to secure a distribution or exhibition contract that forbids publication in JVE, we would be happy to negotiate this provision so as to advance the filmmaker’s interest in getting the film to the largest possible audience.

Methodological Standards. Most academics in the social sciences write research articles. They know their own particular research designs and methods. But they don’t make films. Because most do not make films with a theoretical orientation that presents empirical findings and advances an interpretive argument, they can hardly be expected to know how to evaluate a film on these terms. Scholars typically harbor a prejudice in favor of the written word. All academics know how to write, even if they don’t write well. Filmmaking is a different mode of expression, one that has its own language with unique vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, and is largely a mystery to most social science researchers.

The training of graduate students, historically speaking, has been anemic with regard to what we would call “critical visual literacy.” Most social science graduate programs do not train their M.A. or Ph.D. students in the critical evaluation of films on their own terms, much less train students on how to conceive, produce, and edit a social scientific film. Through their work as peer reviewers of print articles and grant applications and through their training of graduate students, faculty scholars operate as the arbiters of “knowledge products” in the academic world. Hence, their own ignorance vis-à-vis videographic research methods exerts undue influence on academia’s economy of merit. For many decades this structural feature of the knowledge industry has meant the ghettoization of film and video, notwithstanding the tremendous influence of visual media in how people generally understand the world and even in how social scientists teach their students to understand the world.

Ethnografilm and *JVE* seek to establish criteria for peer review processes that allows films to be evaluated on their own scholarly merit and according to criteria that are specific to the development and presentation of intellectual arguments wherein the “data” and the “findings” assume a primarily videographic form.

Institutional Prejudice. Several academics have said to us recently that they “don’t trust movies” – somehow the very form makes the content suspect. When pressed to explain, the conversation turns first to the issue of image as data, then to the core issue of “emotional valence.” Films, much more so than conventional print articles in ethnography journals, activate a variety of emotions in the viewer. This speaks to the multifaceted and unique power of films to convey dynamic information and to present multiple cognitive and affective stimuli simultaneously.

As professional knowledge arbiters, most social scientists consider anything remotely classifiable as “ad hominem” suspect in the logic of academia. The prospect of elevating refereed movies to the status of refereed print articles has inspired discomfort among many academicians. But a lovely and inspirational aspect of the process was our discovery of a large network of filmmakers among academics.

We close this section with a brief, concrete commentary on *JVE* after the first issue and what we have learned. Our soft launch in March 2014 yielded 22 complete submissions. Each film and short textual accompaniment (conceptual framework, method, findings) were reviewed by a panel of three *JVE* peer reviewers. Each of the panels included at least one academic who regularly makes ethnographic films. We matched areas of expertise with the content areas (tags) submitted by the filmmaker. In all, we received a full set of reviews for all of the submitted films, and nearly 75% of them arrived before the deadline! Ultimately *JVE* published five of these films, requested a

“revise and resubmit” for 13, and rejected four of the submissions.

Each review consists of two main prongs: narrative and annotation. Every reviewer is required to submit a narrative review structured very much like that of a print journal review. Required sections of the narrative review include originality, form/technical proficiency, substance of the argument, and originality of the contribution to knowledge in this area of inquiry (guidelines may be found at www.videoethno.com). Reviewers assess both the film and its accompanying text-based synopsis. However, the film must be capable of standing on its own in order for JVE to publish it. The synopsis is published as a text addendum to the main material, the film.

Going forward, we expect to publish regular issues twice a year (September and March) and every December a “special issue” that features selections from the *Ethnografilm* festival. In the December 2014 special issue we expect to publish approximately 15 films from *Ethnografilm* 2014. These films were selected by a subcommittee of the JVE Editorial Board and survived another round of evaluation by a panel of JVE peer reviewers.

We often hear from filmmakers that they simply aren’t willing to affirm their willingness to revise and resubmit. Some say they have “locked” their film and are now in a theater run or some kind of distribution deal. Others argue that because their film has won awards at this or that festival, they should not be asked to revise and resubmit. Still others tell us that they have no money to re-cut their film in response to reviewer evaluations. To all of these folks we reply, as politely as possible, “Then JVE would not be a good fit for your film.”

JVE is certainly not for everyone or every film project - no journal, print or video, can be all things to all people. But it is a beginning, and there is now sufficient experience to state confidently that it is a *strong* start. JVE resonates deeply with academic filmmakers worldwide who have longed for legitimacy. In academic terms, that indicates, most importantly, a peer-reviewed outlet for their work. JVE has welcomed nearly 10,000 unique visitors from nearly 50 different countries. With nearly 1,000 subscribers and 200 volunteer peer reviewers, we are inspired with the shared vision of an academic future where audiovisual essays take their place alongside text as legitimate scholarly products.

While the novelty of journal and festival are readily exaggerated, not least by university administrators, our own view is that both should be operated and viewed as *non*-innovative—their success depends on routinization. Can a film festival be built on the contributions of academics without documentarians? Will a journal of movies motivate contributions of quality considered equal in importance to an article in promotion and tenure decisions? This depends on events and social processes outside our control. In his reflections on Rupert Murdoch’s bid to acquire another media conglomerate, a *New York Times*

critic noted that *print was not a big part of the plan*. Text does not resonate like moving images.

Carr viewed this as a bolt of lightning, “as if a big train with the word FUTURE emblazoned on its side was revving up. But it was difficult not to notice that one car had been uncoupled and would not be leaving the station” (2014). Time will tell if peer review of academic movies will bring them the legitimacy—and routinization—they should possess in the dissemination of social research. Our hunch is that most of you, reading these words, sense that audiovisual essays are the future, which favors cowards, not the bold.

Please make a movie. Submit it to JVE. And come to Paris in the spring.

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