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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

MARTIN GRUBER, 2022, *Sharing the Camera. A Guide to Collaborative Ethnographic Filmmaking*, Sean Kingston Publishing, 182 pp., ISBN: 978-1-912385-44-77

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This book offers a comprehensive and inspiring introduction to what Gruber describes as *collaborative ethnographic filmmaking*, which combines ideas and methods from the fields of ethnographic film, Indigenous media and participatory video. The emphasis is on collaboration, not just as a buzzword, but as a conscientious effort to work with a diversity of persons in the process of making film, ideally of a high aesthetic quality and cinematic complexity. It is all about sharing the camera, because even inexperienced people can learn to make film, for instance through hands-on workshops facilitated by researchers and/or filmmakers. And when researchers give up control over the camera, people we work with can take power over their own filmic representation and create their own films. Collaborative ethnographic filmmaking makes a lot of sense and Gruber shows us how it can be done. He openly shares his experiences, even his mistakes, in a tone of experimental curiosity and courageous reflexivity. Written in a very readable style, the book is structured into two parts.

Part I outlines a toolkit for collaborative filmmaking, following a carefully selected theoretical and methodological framework. This framework draws on concepts and methods in ethnographic filmmaking, Indigenous media and participatory video, which are treated in separate chapters. Focusing on participation and collaboration, the book provides a comprehensive overview of these fields, serving as a useful introduction for scholars from various disciplines. For instance, the chapter on ethnographic filmmaking traces participatory filmmaking to the pioneering work of Robert Flaherty, followed by a succinct overview of the works of Jean Rouch, John Marshall, Judith and David MacDougall. The inclusion of Gruber's various conversations with David MacDougall anchors his analysis empirically, a dialogical exchange between a master and apprentice. Gruber recognises the male dominance in earlier

ethnographic filmmaking, and makes some effort to bring forth female voices, not least the work of Faye Ginsburg. The judicious discussion of how these forerunners in ethnographic filmmaking have dealt with questions of collaboration provides an insightful history into visual anthropology as well as broader discussions in anthropology.

In addition to building on the work of anthropological filmmakers, Gruber draws on Indigenous media and participatory video. He foregrounds the societal significance of cultural and political activism through Indigenous media-making, targeting local as well as international audiences. In addition to discussing various examples of Indigenous media production, he argues that recent collaborations between Indigenous media makers and anthropologists constitute some of the most innovative examples of contemporary audio-visual and multimodal anthropology. Participatory video is described as an approach aimed at enabling representatives of marginalized groups or communities to discuss and communicate issues of concern to them through video production. Participants are usually trained in basic filmmaking skills through workshops and guided in the filmmaking process. Although not common in anthropology, participatory video has been used in community film projects as well as various development projects, inspired by Paulo Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from 1968. Gruber also discusses the less known but very inspiring combination of participatory video, drama and/or fictionalization, or what some scholars have called participatory video drama, which he also compares with theatre for development, traced to Augusto Boal. While acknowledging some of the critique against the use and misuse of participation in dominant discourses of development, Gruber underlines the usefulness of participatory video, both as process and product, for closer collaboration with various groups or communities. Part I is concluded with a short chapter outlining a methodological toolkit for collaborative ethnographic filmmaking, including a list of questions worth thinking with, grouped into three categories: initiative and focus; participant input; and benefits.

In Part II, Gruber explores collaborative ethnographic filmmaking in practice, drawing on his own experiences in Angola, Botswana, and Namibia from 2010 to 2013. This work was carried out as part of the Future Okavango research project, which sought to generate an overview of the ecosystem of the Okavango River Basin. The project included over 130 natural and social scientists from various universities in Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Gruber was part of a sub-project focusing on stakeholder involvement and transdisciplinarity, and tasked with making films about the environment together with local stakeholders. This was primarily done through workshops in village settings, with the help of co-workers. Following a chapter on local

contexts, Gruber discusses his experiences of collaborative filmmaking, focusing on pre-production, production and post-production. Through a detailed description of various activities and discussions, he shares insights from the filmmaking process, with candour and self-awareness. For instance, he reflects on his own positionality as a ‘white, male, foreign expert’ in relationships that can be ‘hierarchical and shaped by structural racism,’ while underlining that ‘it is feasible (and necessary) to undermine such roles and hierarchies and (at least temporarily) create a safe space’ (p. 133-134). Illustrated with colour photographs, these chapters offer an ethnographic description of the collaborative filmmaking process, combining thick description with astute analysis. Part II is concluded with two short chapters, outlining spheres of participation and collaboration, as well as a closing argument on how sharing the camera makes a difference.

The films discussed in Part II are available online at <https://vimeo.com/channels/collaborate>. In *Liparu Lyetu-Our Life* (32 minutes) we can see how well villagers in Northern Namibia managed to master the art of filmmaking, expertly shooting various scenes that capture their use of natural resources, combined with interviews with various experts. Although Gruber himself was hesitant about the expert interviews, fearing they would reproduce hierarchies, the villagers insisted on including them, and he admits that by doing so, they actually reversed power relations. This goes to show what a difference sharing the camera can make.

Sharing the Camera will hopefully inspire more anthropologists to explore collaborative filmmaking, not least to push forward more innovative forms of multimodal anthropology. In my own experience, passing on the camera to interlocutors and giving them the freedom to film what they want changes the research dynamics in rewarding ways. Inspired by MacDougall’s work on social aesthetics in the Doon school (1999) and Pink’s method of walking with video (2007), I walked with teachers and students at an arts college in Tanzania, while they filmed what they thought was interesting on campus (Uimonen 2012). Participants found this research method to be fun as well as empowering, as they took charge of the research process, while I got insights that I would not have obtained in any other way. More recently, I gave a diver in Tanzania a GoPro camera so he could film under water. He had never held a GoPro, yet he managed to get great footage of sea cucumbers in their habitat. To my surprise, the diver also took some creative initiative, turning the camera to capture a small fish in front of his face, thus taking an underwater selfie. When we looked at his footage later on he was very enthusiastic and asked when we could film again. This goes to show what a difference sharing the camera can make. And how much fun it can be to do so.

Paula Uimonen is Professor of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. She is specialized in anthropology of art, digital media, visual culture, world literature, ocean and water. Her current research project [Swahili Ocean Worlds](#) explores environmental and social sustainability in fishing communities in Tanzania, through multi-sited and multisensory fieldwork. This collaborative research project is carried out with researchers from University of Dar es Salaam and funded by the Swedish Research Council (2022-2024). Paula is also involved in the [Decolonizing Research Methodologies](#) project, which is a collaborative effort between universities in Burkina Faso, Mali, Sweden and Tanzania. Paula's recent open access publications include the article "Spiritual Relationality in Swahili Ocean Worlds" (2021, special issue on water in *kritisk etnografi*), the monograph *Invoking Flora Nwapa. Nigerian Women Writers, Femininity and Spirituality in World Literature* (2020, Stockholm University Press), and the book chapter "One World Literature with Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa," in *Claiming Space. Locations and Orientations in World Literatures* (2021, Bloomsbury Academic).

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