

## **Defining Ethnographic Film**

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The first time I needed a working definition of ethnographic film was in high school. As a teenager, with only a limited understanding of anthropology or film, I needed a clear set of principles which I could apply to the films I wanted to write about for my senior project. I found just that in the first edition of Karl Heider’s book *Ethnographic film* (2006), first published in 1976. In this classic text, Heider treats the “*ethnographicness*” of a film as a series of sixteen attributes, each of which contributed to making a film more ethnographic. He even provided a convenient “attribute dimension grid” (2006, p. 109) which I faithfully copied out and used to evaluate and compare each of the films discussed in my paper.

Diagram 1. The attribute dimension grid

1. Appropriateness of sound	
2. Narration	
3. Ethnographic basis	
4. Explicit theory	
5. Relation to printed materials	
6. Voice: point of view	
7. Holism: behavioral contextualization	
8. Physical contextualization	
9. Reflexivity: the ethnographer’s presence	
10. Whole acts	
11. Narrative stories	
12. Whole bodies	
13. Whole interactions	
14. Whole people	
15. Distortion in the filmmaking process	
15a. Inadvertent distortion of behavior	
15b. Intentional distortion of behavior	
15c. Explanation of distortions	
16. Culture change	

Fig. 1: Karl Heider’s “attribute dimension grid”

Looking back at Heider’s book after all these years I am struck by how astute it was in creating a framework which avoided a rigid, normative, definition of ethnographic film. Rather than policing which films would or would not be allowed to wear the label “ethnographic,” his approach admitted films which might score high on some features even if they fell short on others. At the same time, however, some of the features he listed might strike the contemporary reader as dated. The emphasis on “‘whole bodies,’ ‘whole people,’ ‘whole interactions,’ and

‘whole acts’” (2006, p. 5), for instance, seems to hail from an era when the discipline of anthropology was still striving for scientific legitimacy.

It would be nearly thirty years before I would return to the problem of trying to define ethnographic film. The intervening time had seen massive changes in the discipline. When I began my graduate training at Temple University in the nineties, postmodernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonial critique were in the air. The authority and aura of the ethnographer seemed to be a thing of the past (Clifford, 1983). The emphasis seemed to be more on new forms of collaboration (Ruby, 1991), rather than old forms of scientific authority. In such an environment, there seemed little point in trying to rigidly define ethnographic film. True, the first stirrings of a new “sensory” approach to visual anthropology were already beginning to be felt within the discipline but, distracted as I was with my own academic career, it wasn’t until the publication of Sarah Pink’s book in 2009 (Pink, 2009) that I came to fully appreciate these new developments.

It was my appointment to the position of programmer for the 2017 Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival (TIEFF) that brought me back to the question I had first thought about in high school. As programmer I needed to communicate clearly with filmmakers, producers, distributors, and even our own judges so that they could better understand what kinds of films we were looking for. That first year we received over 1,500 submissions! Even if I had never wanted to draw boundaries demarcating what did or didn’t count as an “ethnographic film,” doing so had become a matter of survival.

Like Heider I didn’t want to draw a sharp boundary demarcating the limits of the genre. But I was not satisfied with his unidimensional approach. I felt that it wasn’t just “ethnographicness” that defined the genre, but also things like subject matter and ethics that needed to be accounted for as well. Also, I wanted an approach that would be able to grow as the discipline itself changed. I offer a sketch of this new approach at the end of this paper, but before doing so it is worth spending some time looking at previous attempts to define ethnographic film. In the next section I examine four frames by which ethnographic film has been defined so far. This is not intended as a comprehensive history, but rather as a brief overview of some of the key movements which shaped my own approach to defining the field.

#### **Four previous frames for defining ethnographic film**

A full accounting of anthropology’s shifting perspectives on visual ethnography would ideally include the early history of anthropological photography (Collier, Collier, & Hall, 1986; Edwards, 1994; Grimshaw, 2001; Pinney, 2011), as well as new developments emerging from anthropological engagements with new media technologies (Biella, 1993; Collins, Durnington, &

Gill, 2017; Collins & Durington, 2014). Anna Grimshaw, Christopher Pinney, and others have argued that the early rise of the fieldworker displaced the formerly central role of the camera as “the central validator of the anthropological enterprise” (Pinney, 1992, p. 78), showing just how dependent any definition of visual ethnography depends upon what Grimshaw calls the anthropological “metaphysic,” or a “set of beliefs by which anthropologists approach the world” (Grimshaw, 2001, p. 7). Even if we just start our narrative from the beginnings of visual anthropology as an independent sub-discipline in the late sixties (Ruby, 2001) as I do here, and the rise and proliferation of ethnographic film festivals in subsequent decades (Ruby, 2005, p. 161), there have still been major shifts in the anthropological metaphysic.

I have identified four “frames” through which ethnographic film has been defined over the years. While these frames necessarily reflect the shifting metaphysics of the discipline of anthropology and much of social sciences writ large, the small number of people engaged in these debates means that each position is strongly identified with the personalities and biographies of a handful of well-known scholars. I have already mentioned Karl Heider’s work. He is the scholar most closely associated with the first frame, which I call “ethnographic film as record.” Jay Ruby is associated with the second one, “ethnographic film as text.” David MacDougall and Lucien Castaing-Taylor were both instrumental in establishing the third: “ethnographic film as sense impression.” So far, this tripartite approach mirrors what you will find in standard accounts of the field’s development, but here I want to make the case for adding a fourth frame: “ethnographic film as relational practice.” Historically, this fourth frame was developed in parallel to the others but is rarely placed alongside them as a defining element of ethnographic film in this way. Jay Ruby has also had a big impact on the study of image ethics, co-editing two volumes on the topic (Gross, 2003; Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 1991), but the views presented here owe a lot to the writings of Faye Ginsburg as well, especially her work on Indigenous media.

### *Ethnographic film as record*

This first frame sees the primary purpose of ethnographic film to “preserve, in the mind of the viewer, the structure of the events it is recording as interpreted by the participants” (Asch, Marshall, & Spier, 1973, p. 179). Heider’s emphasis on “‘whole bodies,’ ‘whole people,’ ‘whole interactions,’ and ‘whole acts’” (2006, p. 5), discussed above, can be explained by this desire to create a record that might be of service to the wider scientific community. Scholars working in this frame emphasized the need to downplay the more cinematic aspects of film that might detract from their value as an ethnographic record. In Heider’s words: “if ethnographic demands conflict with cinematographic demands, ethnography must prevail” (Heider, 2006, p. 3). This frame views film as data or evidence, influenced by anthropological arguments to be sure, but

not as constituting an argument on its own. As such, this approach tends to emphasize the importance of providing supplementary texts:

It has been traditionally felt that film, the visual image, should be complete in itself. This, unfortunately, has seldom been possible. Filling in information with narration has been tried with varying success, but the more narration a film contains the more guidance it gives the audience, and the less opportunity it gives them to draw their own conclusions from their observations. Karl Heider has proposed one possible solution, the written module, which would accompany the ethnographic film (Asch et al., 1973, p. 183)

This view of film as part of the ethnographic record has interesting consequences for how these scholars view films by non-anthropologists. While films by anthropologists might be able to record real world (“whole”) events in such a way that they can become useful to anthropologists as data, all films are themselves records of the cultures that produced them. Thus, as Heider says “even films that show only clouds or lizards have been made by people and therefore say something about the culture of the individuals who made them and who use them” (Heider, 2006, p. 4). But this poses a problem, because one must then carefully demarcate the boundary between films-as-data, and filming-for-data. The former can be a kind of “naive ethnography” (Heider, 2006, p. 4), while the latter bring the knowledge of the anthropologist to bear on the recording process.

While some of the scholars working in this frame might rightly be called naive empiricists, it would be a mistake to view Heider’s own work in this light. He made it clear that the anthropologists who produced these visual texts were themselves culturally embedded, and that the records they produced did not stand on their own. He was always sure to emphasize the importance of putting this observed behavior into its “cultural context,” without which such data could not be properly understood (Heider, 2006, p. 5). Even with such caveats, however, the hope that films could be the basis for further research never really panned out. As Durlington and Ruby pointed out, “few publications based upon the analysis of filmed behavior” were ever published (Durlington & Ruby, 2011, p. 194).

### *Ethnographic film as text*

Jay Ruby’s writing about ethnographic film can sound quite pessimistic, but behind that pessimism lies the heart of an idealist. Ruby would like nothing more than to see ethnographic film elevated to the same position within the field currently held by written ethnographies. If the “ethnographic film as record” frame aims its sights at something more akin to illustration, the “ethnographic film as text” frame championed by Ruby asks us to think seriously about how images might be able to do what texts can do: “an ethnographic film should be [...] subjected to

the same or analogously rigorous scientific examination and criticism as any other product of anthropology” (Ruby, 1975, p. 104). Sadly, Ruby has become less optimistic over time. Looking back on this claim thirty years later, he stated that he had found “no theoretical discussion within cultural anthropology that includes any contributions from ethnographic film” (2005, p. 161). Nonetheless, Ruby’s efforts to uplift ethnographic film continue to offer important insights into the nature of the medium and its role in the discipline.

In 1975, just one year before Heider published his book, Ruby offered his own list of requirements for what would make a film ethnographic:

an ethnography must contain the following elements: (1) the major focus of an ethnographic work must be a description of a whole culture or some definable unit of culture; (2) an ethnographic work must be informed by an implicit or explicit theory of culture which causes the statements within the ethnography to be ordered in a particular way; (3) an ethnographic work must contain statements which reveal the methodology of the author; and (4) an ethnographic work must employ a distinctive lexicon—an anthropological argot (Ruby, 1975, p. 107).

Before proceeding, it is worth pointing out that by dividing Ruby and Heider into different frames, I necessarily exaggerate the differences and downplay the similarities. The truth is that there was a fair amount of overlap since they were both working within the same larger anthropological metaphysics of the time. Ruby’s calls for “a description of a whole culture,” and a “theory of culture” are very similar to what we find in Heider’s definition. It is in Ruby’s last two requirements that we see their differences more clearly, and I will explore each of these in turn.

I see a direct connection between Ruby’s call for explicit statements of methodology and his writings on “reflexive anthropology” that he would go on to develop in a series of works published over the next few years (Ruby, 1977, 1980, 1981). In those he defines reflexivity, not as the mere presence of self-referentiality (a point missed by many of his critics), but as a means of conveying to the audience the intentionality of the author so that they are able to read into the film no more or less “than what was meant” (Ruby, 1980, p. 157). As he writes,

being reflexive means that the producer deliberately, intentionally reveals to his [sic] audience the underlying epistemological assumptions which caused him to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present his findings in a particular way (Ruby, 1980, p. 157).

Here we can see what I mean when I called Ruby an idealist. The kind of reflexivity he was calling for required a lot from the filmmaker. First, it requires them to be fully aware of their own assumptions. Second, it requires that they are also aware of the effect of those assumptions

on their final product. Third, they must be able to clearly articulate these assumptions in the context of a visual work. And fourth, all of this must be both sufficiently accurate and understandable to the audience in such a way that they can deploy this knowledge to interpret the film while they are viewing it. As Marcus Banks has said, it requires knowing exactly “how much information needs to be revealed and of what type” (Banks, 1992, p. 121). But Lucian Castaing-Taylor has also pointed out that these statements themselves must be understood reflexively, thus falling “into the absurdity of an endless regression” (Taylor, 1996, p. 83). David MacDougall questions the need for such special contrivances since, he argues, “images are inherently reflexive” (MacDougall, 2005, p. 3). By this he means that the image necessarily indexes the moment of creation, and the encounter between the photographer and their subject. He goes on to argue that “these signs are often difficult to interpret individually, but they gain direction and significance through the course of a film. Viewers cannot avoid interpreting these signs, however unconsciously, any more than they can in the exchanges of daily life (MacDougall, 2005, p. 3). The unstated implication of MacDougall’s perspective is that the problem of reflexivity is best solved by training the viewer to be conscious of these signs, rather than relying entirely upon the filmmaker to make everything explicit.

Ruby’s forth requirement is an interesting one. The claim that ethnographic films should have their own specialized language is based on his understanding that this is what “separates written ethnography from other works” and that part of the professional training of anthropologists is a sensitivity to these linguistic codes (Ruby, 1975, p. 107). Here his biggest intervention might be one that gets little notice: his teaching. Former students of Ruby’s can attest to his encyclopedic knowledge of experimental and *Avant guard* cinema. Indeed, he often incorporated such works into his classes, and at least one Temple graduate has gone on to write about the links between visual anthropology and experimental film (Ramey, 2011). Whereas MacDougall sees Ruby’s self-professed interest in *Avant guard* cinema as in contradiction to his textualism ( MacDougall, 2005, p. 268), I think this is a misunderstanding of how Ruby saw the link between the two. I would argue that Ruby’s interest in these films is driven precisely by a desire to develop this uniquely anthropological cinematic language and thus complements, rather than contradicts, his textualism. One might argue, however, that it was sensory ethnographers, with their rejection of textualism who did more to develop a uniquely anthropological visual language, albeit one quite different from what Ruby was arguing for. We will turn to them next.

Before we move on, there is one additional element of Ruby’s definition that needs to be discussed. That is his oft-repeated claim that “an ethnographic film” should be “made by a trained ethnographer/anthropologist as a means of conveying anthropological knowledge obtained from field work” (2005, p. 160). Part of any attempt to define ethnographic film as a genre is a desire to establish the discipline of visual anthropology on firm footing, and thus to justify the unique training such programs provide. Ruby is perhaps the most openly transparent of all the scholars discussed here with regard to his desire to not just establish ethnographic film

as a genre, but establish a firm footing for visual anthropology as a sub-discipline within anthropology. If ethnographic films are those films made by people with training in the discipline and those people's training is what allows them to understand the language of those films, we get a virtuous circle that legitimates the genre and the discipline together. It is within such a context that I think we can best understand this requirement. Although, as we shall see, some of the other approaches to the discipline are more interested in breaking down the institutional boundaries between art and anthropology than in building them up.

### *Ethnographic film as sense impression*

Where the film as record frame sought to downplay the aesthetic devices of cinema to capture "whole acts," and the textual frame sought to imbue the visual with the qualities found in written ethnographies, our third frame, ethnographic film as sense impression, rejects the supposed inferiority of image to text. Instead, it emphasizes the unique elements already found in visual communication. In a 1996 paper entitled "iconophobia," Lucian Castaing-Taylor decried the logocentrism he found in scholars like Heider and Ruby: "so long as anthropologists continue to hold that language is paradigmatic for anthropology, then a 'pictorial-visual' mode of anthropology can only come into being by divesting itself of its distinguishing features. And if that is the case, then why bother?" (Taylor, 1996, p. 85). Castaing-Taylor argued that "film captures something of the lyricism of lived experience" in a way that text cannot (Taylor, 1996, p. 88).

One of the most prolific and vocal proponents of this position has been the filmmaker David MacDougall who, like Castaing-Taylor, argued against a logocentric view of visual media. MacDougall feels that logocentrism "neglects many of the ways in which [images] create our knowledge" (MacDougall, 2005, p. 2). MacDougall insists that images can do things which words cannot. He says that this ability of images

allows us to reenter the corporeal spaces of our own and others' lives—the manner in which we all, as social creatures, assimilate forms and textures through our senses, learn things before we understand them, share experiences with others, and move through the varied social environments that surround us (MacDougall, 2005, p. 270).

Reading this I can't help but think of the ways in which great writers build images through words and wonder whether pictographic images are really that different. Perhaps, rather than creating a sharp binary between text and images we would do better to place them along a continuum. This is precisely what Castaing-Taylor does in his iconophobia article. Drawing on the philosopher Nelson Goodman, he compares the "density" of images and text. In doing so, he acknowledges the ways that film mixes words, sounds, and images "all flowing into and through



one another” in such a way that the result “is both dense and differentiated, continuous and discontinuous, all at the same time” (Taylor, 1996, p. 85). Such a view would suggest that images, because of their density, are better able to do certain things, even if the abilities of language and images overlap.<sup>1</sup>

This new sensory approach has been tremendously productive for the field as a whole. In addition to the many well-known films made under the aegis of sensory ethnography, including work by Castaing-Taylor and MacDougall, there have been a number of dedicated volumes on the subject, including: Sarah Pink’s *Doing sensory ethnography* (2009), and *Beyond text?: critical practices and sensory anthropology* (Cox, Irving, & Wright, 2016). Moreover, two of the major centers for training visual ethnographers, The Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard (co-founded by Castaing-Taylor), and the Granada Center of Visual Anthropology at Manchester, are closely aligned with this approach. The approach has also helped to open up ethnographic film to the other senses as well, with an increased attention to the aural dimensions of fieldwork, as well as the emergence of purely sonic ethnographies which “do anthropology through sound” (Feld & Brenneis, 2004, p. 461).

How to account for the popularity of this approach? For one thing, by valorizing what is unique to visual media this approach better serves the need of those who must make a case for their discipline to institutional decision-makers and funding organizations than did approaches that seemed to feel visual media fall short of what written ethnographies can do. But I believe a much more important factor are the changes which have simultaneously taken place in the wider field of anthropology. Changes which strongly resonate with a sensory approach. In Grimshaw’s terms, the metaphysics of anthropology have changed, and so it only makes sense that the definition of ethnographic film would change along with them. These changes are succinctly summarized by Wolff:

the turn to “affect”, the (re)turn to phenomenology (and post-phenomenology), actor-network theory in sociology and science studies, theories of the post-human (human/animal, human/ nature, human/technology), theories of materiality, emphasis on the agency of objects, the turn to neuroscience in the humanities and social sciences, and the insistence on “presence” as an unmediated encounter (Wolff, 2012, p. 4).

These changes are sometimes referred to simply as “the ontological turn” in anthropology. While they have a long history, it was at the American Anthropology Association’s annual meeting in Chicago in 2013 that they could be said to have finally taken center stage (Golub, 2013).

By emphasizing the senses as “important, necessary, and alternative means of anthropological knowledge and analysis” (Cox et al., 2016, p. 11), the sensory frame has encouraged formal experimentation which has pushed the limits of what counts as visual ethnography. It has opened up a vital space for those who feel frustrated or excluded by more

mainstream anthropological ways of knowing valorized by the other two frames. Nor has this experimentation been limited to the movie screen. The Ethnographic Terminalia exhibit which now happens each year alongside the American Anthropology Association is one example of the new kinds of spaces that this frame has helped open up (Brodine et al., 2011). Inspired by Ethnographic Terminalia we did something similar here in Taiwan with Sensefield, an exhibition which ran alongside TIEFF in 2017 (de Seta & Friedman, 2019). Online spaces are opening up new kinds of multimodal interaction as well (Collins et al., 2017).

### *Ethnographic film as relational practice*

The three frames discussed above each situate ethnographic film in relation to text. The record frame tries to minimize the language of cinema which it sees as a distortion of the record. The textual frame tries to forge a new cinematic language modeled on textual practices within the discipline. And the sensory frame rejects textual norms in favor of what it sees as unique about visual media. However, there is a fourth frame that does not primarily position itself in relation to text: the relational frame. I take this term from Faye Ginsburg who articulates it as a critique of the sensory frame. Praising the frame's "vibrant formal interest in and capacious commitment to the world's messiness and to cinematic experimentation," she goes on to say that

what all this work neglects to stress, however, is any sense of accountability for the ethical/political relationships that ethnographic and other documentary filmmakers co-construct with the subjects whose lives are central to their films. I think of this relational documentary practice as the fundamental act for visual/audio nonfiction media makers who take seriously the accountability that, ideally, accompanies the privilege of making films about other people's lives (Ginsburg, 2018, p. 42)

Ginsburg here focuses on what she terms the "aesthetics of accountability" (Ginsburg, 2018, p. 39), but for my present purposes I want to think of the relational frame in a wider perspective, one which includes research ethics, collaborative documentary, as well as the inclusion within academic spaces (i.e. film festivals, journals, classrooms, etc.) of works by filmmakers from communities that have traditionally been on the other side of the ethnographic lens.

This frame has been around as long as the other three, but discussions over relational ethics have generally been separate from discussions over the definition of the genre. Which isn't to say that the scholars we have been looking at aren't all deeply concerned with relational questions—they are—but, rather, that these questions are generally not treated as essential for determining what makes a film ethnographic. I think this is because most of these writers focus on written ethnographies as the point of comparison but, as a festival programmer, I am actually more interested in differentiating ethnographic films from other kinds of documentaries than

from written texts. I think the unique relational commitments of anthropological fieldworkers, as well as our discipline's relationships with those who have been the objects of our research, can be useful for thinking about this distinction.

Linda Tuhiwai-Smith has written that “from the vantage point of the colonized [...]the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (2013, p. 1). Anthropologists are not insensitive to this critique and have a long history of trying to address it within the discipline. As far back as 1902 Boas shared authorship with his Kwakwaka'wakw collaborator George Hunt, but it is usually the publication of the book *Writing culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) that is used to mark the period when such debates came to the forefront of the discipline. But it would be a mistake to think that the debates of this era settled the problem once and for all. Rather, they were just the beginning of a conversation that anthropologists are still having to this day, as can be seen in recent debates about the ethical practices of the journal *HAU* (West, 2018). Not only does the discipline still struggle to become more diverse (Patterson, Hutchinson, & Goodman, 2008), but the ethical norms of fieldwork continue to be challenged from within as well as without.

Jay Ruby's 1991 article “Speaking for, speaking about, speaking with, or speaking alongside—an anthropological and documentary dilemma” is one of the most detailed explorations of the various ways in which documentary and ethnographic filmmakers have tackled the issue of “sharing their authority with the people they film” (1991, p. 62). In his conclusion, however, he warns us not to forget that “In trying to give the subjects' voice room in their films, documentarians are also attempting to locate a new voice for themselves” (1991, p. 62). According to Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, this was true even of Boas's relationship with George Hunt, mentioned above. They argue that, in making bilingual Hunt a co-author, Boas simultaneously erased some of the other Kwakwaka'wakw voices involved in the creation of this jointly authored text (Bauman, 1999, pp. 274–282). To avoid thinking of collaboration as a binary, Ruby draws on Barbara Myerhoff to suggest we need to forge a new style of ethnographic filmmaking that will forge a “a *third voice* [...] an amalgam of the maker's voice and the voice of the subject, blended in such a manner as to make it impossible to discern which voice dominates the work” (1991, p. 62). Faye Ginsburg's notion of the “aesthetics of accountability” seems to be arguing for something similar. In either case, I think it is important to emphasize that each ethnographic encounter, requires its own collaborative approach, based on the particular context of that encounter (Friedman, 2013, p. 397). An anthropologist working with a media savvy YouTube star will necessarily take a different approach than if they were working with an older informant who never owned a camera.

Relational ethics in documentary film are not just confined to the filmmaking process but need to be thought of in terms of “the domain of distribution and dissemination” (Menziés, 2015, p. 111) as well. In this regard, ethnographic film festivals serve an important role, as an

important venue for the screening and discussion of films by filmmakers from communities that have traditionally been on the other side of the lens. Faye Ginsburg uses the concept of an optical “parallax” to argue for the importance of bringing ethnographic and Indigenous media in dialog with each other in order to “expand our sense of the field's possibilities and revive its contemporary purpose” (Ginsburg, 1995, p. 65). More recently she has drawn on the work of Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja to argue for a view of Indigenous media of “visual sovereignty” (Ginsburg, 2016, p. 583). The sovereignty perspective moves away from narrow disciplinary concerns to emphasize the importance of Indigenous media in “larger battles over cultural citizenship, racism, sovereignty and land rights, [etc.]” (Ginsburg, 2016, p. 592).

### **Ethnographic films: a family of resemblances**

Having laid out the four frames by which we have historically approached the question of defining ethnographic film, I now offer up my own solution to the problem. As a festival programmer, one of my goals has been to create the kind of parallax effect advocated for by Ginsburg, bringing different kinds of films in dialog with each other. For this reason, sticking to any one of the four frames discussed above would be too limiting. The solution, I believe, can be found in the work of the semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco. In his famous definition of “fascism” Eco (1995) drew on Wittgenstein’s notion of a “language-game” (Wittgenstein, 1973, p. 31) to describe a fascism as a loosely bound “family of resemblances” rather than a checklist of features which something must have in order to meet the criteria for being fascist.

In a checklist approach, a regime might not be called fascist if it is missing even one feature. For instance, the lack of death camps is often used to silence critics of contemporary political regimes who wish to draw attention to certain fascist tendencies. The family of resemblances approach avoids this by not requiring all features to be shared by any two groups in the set. Wittgenstein even allows two items to be included in the group even if they share no features in common—as long as they share features with other intermediate elements in the series. Eco asks us to “consider the following sequence”:



Suppose there is a series of political groups in which group one is characterized by the features ABC, group two by the features BCD, and so on. Group two is similar to group one since they have two features in common; for the same reasons three is similar to two and four is similar to three. Notice that three is also similar to one (they have in common the feature C). The most

curious case is presented by four, obviously similar to three and two, but with no feature in common with one. However, owing to the uninterrupted series of decreasing similarities between one and four, there remains, by a sort of illusory transitivity, a family resemblance between four and one (Eco, 1995, p. 5)

This approach, when applied to ethnographic films, allows us to explain why seemingly unrelated films are included in the same festival. Like a family where two siblings don't look related until you see a third sibling that shares some features with each of them, these films might both share some defining features as to what it means to be an ethnographic film without having any two of those features overlap. But when one encounters a third film that shares some features with both of these films, the connection becomes clear.

The parallax effect that comes from this more fluid approach allows us to benefit from the different ways each of these films contributes to the discipline, without arbitrarily excluding a film because it failed to meet one of the listed criteria. Insisting on any one defining feature only serves to kick the problem down the road. Whatever this defining feature might be, it too will require a clear definition, and so on. For instance, what does it mean for a filmmaker to be an anthropologist? Do they have to have a Ph.D.? Need their training be in cultural anthropology, or will archaeology do as well? How about someone who has a Ph.D. but never held an academic job? It seems to me that drawing such boundaries does more harm than good. Durlington and Ruby call David MacDougall an "autodidact," who is "lacking any formal training in anthropology" (Durlington & Ruby, 2011, p. 201) and yet MacDougall has arguably been one of the most influential scholar-filmmakers in the discipline. It seems clear that if we were to exclude his writing and his films, the field would be much poorer for it. The approach described here, on the other hand, would allow us to recognize that having anthropological training is relevant to the discussion we have regarding someone's films without having to also exclude all films by someone without such training (assuming their films still satisfied some of the other criteria.)

The four frames discussed in the first half of this paper are prescriptive, describing ethnographic films as the authors would like them to be. The record frame rewards films like *Wedding camels* (J. MacDougall & MacDougall, 1976) that portray "whole acts," while the sensory frame prioritizes films like *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor, Paravel, & Neyrat, 2014) that instead give the audience a fragmented and impressionistic experience. The advantage of the family of resemblances approach described here is that it can accommodate both films equally, as well as ethnofictions like *Petit a petit* (Rouch et al., 1971) and Indigenous dramas like *Atanarjuat: the fast runner* (Kunuk, 2001). There is nothing radical about such a position. If you look at visual anthropology film festivals, syllabi, textbooks, and journal articles you will see these films all placed together. But few have tried to articulate a coherent argument as to why that should be. Another advantage of this approach is that it can better accommodate future

changes in the anthropological metaphysic, like what we have seen happen with the ontological turn.

The family of resemblances approach, however, is still limited to a single dimension of analysis. We can already see this with Heider’s sixteen features. This invariably gives the sense of hierarchy, with those films that check off more features seen as somehow being more ethnographic. To avoid that, I’ve instead identified four dimensions of analysis. These should not be confused with the four frames mentioned earlier. I drew my inspiration from each of those frames, but I’ve gone out of my way to avoid the kind of prescriptivism we see there (although my own biases have surely influenced my choices). The four dimensions are: disciplinary dialog, ethnographic subjects, ethnographic styles, and methodological norms. I discuss these in the next section, but first I want to make clear these are based entirely on my own impressions, not on an extensive empirical analysis. Nor have I attempted to provide a comprehensive list of the various features in each of these dimensions. The goal here is to point the way towards a different approach to the problem, rather than trying to offer a final and conclusive discussion which would settle the matter once and for all.

One way of thinking about this approach would be to envision what is known as a “spider chart” (also known as a “radar chart.”) Such charts are well suited to representing multivariate data such as the four dimensions I have identified.

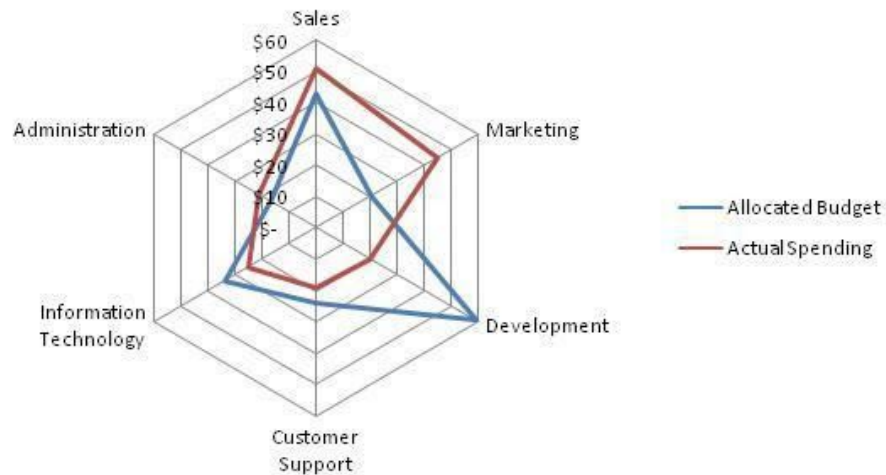


Fig. 1: Sample spider chart (Clement, 2006)]

The image provided by such a chart is useful in illustrating what a multidimensional approach might look like, but the problem with such a chart is that it assumes a uniform scale for each film. A better approach would be one that allowed us to have a sliding scale. As a festival programmer I have noticed that I will pay more attention to the stylistic features of a sensory ethnography, and more attention to the ethics of a collaborative project. It isn’t that I don’t look

at all the dimensions for each film, but that each film invites being judged in a certain way. This is exactly the kind of inherent reflexivity that MacDougall was talking about, and which I think any festival programmer is sensitive to.

### **The four dimensions of ethnographic film**

The four dimensions of ethnographic film sketched out in this section are meant to illustrate how we might get around some of the limitations in each of the four frames which have so far guided our discipline, while still holding on to what has made our discipline unique. The first dimension, “disciplinary dialog,” does this most explicitly. Although I strongly disagree with Ruby’s attempts to narrow the definition of field to films made by trained anthropologists, a battle he admits is a “minority opinion” (2005, p. 160), the family of resemblances approach advocated here allows us to value such training without making it an absolute requirement. By framing it as “dialog” with the discipline, rather than solely in terms of credentials, whether or not someone received a Ph.D., teaches at a university, or merely reads a lot on their own won’t matter. What matters is how well the work itself engages the literature and films produced and valued by the discipline. For instance, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film *Reassemblage* (Trinh, 1983) is valuable to us precisely because it engages with ethnographic discourses, even if she herself is not an anthropologist. Similarly, Timothy Asch spent his career collaborating closely with anthropologists, despite not being trained as one himself (Ruby, 2000, p. 115). Of course, not all films that are intended to be in dialog with anthropology succeed in their task. As Marcus Banks points out, how a work is received by others is a vital part of that dialog (Banks, 1992, p. 117). For a film to succeed, it needs to do much more than just engage a discipline. It needs to do that well, and it needs to do so in a way that resonates with current disciplinary concerns. A film that was accepted as ethnographic twenty years ago, wouldn’t necessarily be accepted today without significant changes.

The second dimension is that of “ethnographic subjects.” Subjects here is meant to have a double meaning: both referring to the topics which are of interest to researchers as well as the people and communities that they study. Perhaps we should more clearly separate out “ethnographic films” from “films of interest to ethnographers” but this approach aims to keep the line somewhat fuzzy. For instance, biographical films about anthropologists might not be ethnographic, but would certainly be of interest to audiences at an ethnographic film festival. One such film is *Savage memory* (Stuart, & Thomson, 2012), in which one of Malinowski’s grandchildren comes to terms with his family’s legacy. Changes within the discipline have broadened the scope of this dimension considerably. While many anthropologists would recognize John Marshall’s 1962 film *A joking relationship* (Marshall, 1962) as anthropological in part because it deals with the classic kinship relationship between a woman and her

great-uncle, today it seems that nearly any topic under the sun could be considered anthropological. Here the first and second dimensions overlap, since disciplinary relevance of a topic comes from an engagement with literature on the subject. In many cases, the relevance will come from the context of the classroom or festival in which the films are shown. In other cases, the colonial history of the discipline might provide that context, such as with films by members of communities that were previously studied by anthropologists but who now have the means to speak for themselves (see discussion of visual sovereignty above.)

The third dimension is that of “ethnographic styles.” There are a wide variety of styles that mark the genre of ethnographic film: observational, reflexive, sensory, etc. While not all of these styles are exclusive to ethnographic film, some films are clearly marked as ethnographic by their stylistic choices. The recent popularity of sensory ethnography may be partially explained by the extent to which it has helped forge a recognizable ethnographic style. As a programmer I’ve seen many films trying to copy the aesthetics of *Sweetgrass* (Barbash & Castaing-Taylor, 2009). In some cases, the use of a particular style might serve as a way of engaging earlier films in dialog, deliberately referencing the work of Jean Rouch. Hu Tai-li does this in the reflexive opening scene of *Voices of Orchid Island* (Hu & Li, 1993). Or style might serve as means to critique ethnography, such as in *Reassemblage*. The concept of style I am deploying here owes a debt to Bill Nichols’ concept of “modes” of documentary filmmaking (Nichols, 2001), but it is important to note that there might be multiple modes or styles in a single film. This was the case with our film *Please don’t beat me, Sir!* (Friedman & Talukdar, 2011), which mixed ethnofiction, reflexive discussion, and more traditional documentary styles.

Finally, the fourth dimension, “methodological norms,” refers to the manner of production; including both the fieldwork methods which have been at the heart of modern anthropology since Malinowski, as well as the ethnical norms which have developed around both written and visual ethnographies. One of the things that distinguishes ethnographic films from exoticizing TV documentaries is that the filmmakers have often built a long-term relationship with their subjects along with some sense of accountability to those subjects. *Guru, a Hijra family* (Colson & Le Dauphinis, 2016) was made by two non-academics, Laurie Colson and Axelle Le Dauphinis, but because their long term fieldwork and close relationship with their film’s subjects shows through, the film was shown in half a dozen ethnographic or anthropological film festivals, including both TIEFF and the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Film Festival. Films that use collaborative methods inspired by Jean Rouch would also fit within this dimension. The Society for Visual Anthropology’s annual film festival gives out the Jean Rouch Award to honor such films precisely for this reason.

## **Conclusion**



In conclusion, I'd like to share the way I defined ethnographic film in call for films we used for TIEFF 2019. As stated in the introduction, I started thinking about these issues in order to communicate with filmmakers, distributors, and our own festival judges. The multidimensional approach described here is a bit specialized and baroque for such purposes, so I needed to come up with a much simpler version that could be easily understood by a diverse audience. This is what I came up with:

TIEFF takes a flexible stance regarding what counts as an “ethnographic” film, including not just works made by anthropologists but also films made by professional filmmakers who display an ethnographic sensibility in their work. That means films which are made in an ethical manner without sensationalizing their subjects. Films that are the product of a long term close collaboration between filmmaker and subject are especially welcome. While we occasionally do accept fiction films, experimental art films, biographies, sports documentaries, and films about musicians, such films will only be considered if they are accompanied by a convincing statement regarding their suitability for the festival. TIEFF is especially proud of its commitment to celebrating the uniqueness and vibrancy of indigenous cultures and has been one of Taiwan’s most important venues for showcasing the work of both local and international indigenous filmmakers. As such we strongly encourage indigenous filmmakers to submit their work to our festival. (Taiwan Association of Visual Ethnography, 2019)

What is an ethnographic film? It’s a family of resemblances looking at features spread out over four dimensions of analysis: disciplinary dialog, ethnographic subjects, ethnographic styles, and methodological norms. But that definition only really becomes important when we need to try to think through border cases or changing norms within the discipline. The for the vast majority of cases, something like this paragraph should do the trick.

## Note

1. In making this argument I’m inspired by F. Niyi Akinnaso’s writings on orality and literacy, where he similarly argues that oral cultures are able to do many of the things that are usually attributed to literacy (Akinnaso, 1992).

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