

# REFLECTIONS ON ETHNOGRAPHIC RE-ENACTMENT: FROM THE CUBBY FILM SCREENING IN HELSINKI, AUTUMN 2023

*\*This is the first essay of the *The Anthropologist's Toolkit* series. This essay series peers into the anthropologist's toolkit to reflect on what ethnographic methodology constitutes in all its multimodal forms.*

*From the Cubby* is a film written in memory of the protagonist of the film, Martin, who passed away during its production. Based in Southeast England in Canterbury, the name of the film derives from a temporary encampment set up and frequented by members of the city's rough-sleeping population, members including Martin. In the film, the audience learns a little bit about Martin's Romani heritage and his upbringing, leading up to his adult years when he struggled with illicit drug consumption whilst drifting across Canterbury's homeless encampments. Directed by Joe Spence as part of his anthropology doctoral project and co-directed by Nick Chamberlain, the film is based on six years of ethnographic fieldwork and is divided into three episodes, two of which were screened in Helsinki, respectively, in spring and autumn 2023.

Alongside a memoir and commemorative piece devoted to a close friend, there is no question that *From the Cubby* is an anthropological enquiry into the margins of Britain's urban poor. Halfway through the film, another overlapping theme is introduced through the story of the co-director, Nick. Nick's

story is one of the bonds and dependencies that can materialise in the unanticipated friendships which arise when doing research. The audience learns about Nick's struggles, dealing with years of heroin addiction and living in the cubby with Martin, who was his closest friend.

Near the end of the film, we see Nick infected with tuberculosis, as the disease takes hold of Canterbury's homeless community. We see the first-hand hardships Nick faces, navigating the housing system and the endless loopholes in accessing Britain's National Health Services. We also see how Joe has no option but to step up and offer Nick accommodation in his own home, even though it means putting his own and his partner's health at risk through exposure to tuberculosis. This is the brutal outcome of Britain's conservative-led austerity programmes, which have brutally stripped away the housing and healthcare rights of its citizens.

If the rich audio and visual encapsulations of the film fill in the textual details of social life, they also inform its ethnographic tone, triggering an emotional engagement in the spectator with the lives of those experiencing homelessness. By invoking these emotions, the film debunks stereotypes and opens a dialogue towards a deeper understanding of the rough-sleeping community.

The film also evokes a web of finer-tuned stories linked to Canterbury. These fine-tuned

narratives carry a tone of mystique and wander, encapsulated in the visual documentation of the city and its monastic cathedral. Rich with minute attention to detail, it is this complex interweaving of storytelling I found most striking and contemplative about the film.

After the screening in Helsinki, I had the pleasure of talking with Joe and Nick about their collaboration in more detail. They explained to me that, from the film's conception, it has carried a collaborative ethos. This began after the death of Martin, when together Joe and Nick started recalling past events and re-enacted scripted scenes together in a way that felt authentic to and mindful of Martin. The recalling, reminiscing, and re-enacting of events from the past opened up an avenue for Joe and Nick to grieve and heal from the loss of Martin. They reminded me that taking accountability is crucial for both Joe and Nick when they represent Martin and as they portray Martin's life on screen. In remaining close to his experiences, Nick and Joe have together scripted, edited out, and concealed portions of the movie which they decided Martin and his family would not have wanted screened.

Drawing from Nick and Joe's retrieval of memories, many nuances in the film are re-enacted scenes to enrich the story. For example, the scenes of the cubby itself are carefully reassembled re-enactments of the former encampment, which has since been demolished. Rather than inventions or fabrications, these scenes become re-enactments to tell a multilayered story inspired by lived experiences.

Re-enacting staged scenes has been a common tool since the inception of documentary film-making, or docufictions, such as the 1926 film *Maona* filmed in Samoa. Samoans are displayed dressed in tapa-cloth costumes, which, during filming, were no longer

worn by locals during coming-into-manhood rituals and painful tattoo practices. At the time, re-enacting scenes and capturing them through visual technologies were also commonly employed by anthropologists as active fieldwork strategies in the face of a presumed cultural decline (Grimshaw 2001; Cubero 2021).

The anthropologist's commitment to the salvage paradigm, which prioritised moving imagery as a tool for capturing and communicating data, has since been critiqued and replaced with new practices in visual anthropology. Extending authorship to the people represented in front of the camera serves as one way of overcoming the salvage paradigm. More recently, anthropologists who capture more-than-textual ethnography continuously work towards renegotiating the relationship between the researcher and the ethnographic subject (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamon 2019). The objective here is to share authorship with the anthropologist's research subjects in efforts to defuse traditional power relations around epistemic authority. This was also Joe's motivation when he extended his film-making project into a collaborative endeavour.

In conversation with Joe, he informed me that, because re-enactment is so central to how he films ethnographic documentaries, he sees it as almost inevitable that he—the director—and the people he films become collaborators. Over time, as Joe explained to me, the very act of re-enacting scenes to capture the perfect shot inevitably generated an interpersonal relationship and co-authorship. It built a level of trust and consent that might not have been there or would possibly take another form if *From the Cubby* was not a visual, but a written ethnography.

Re-enacting events is not unique to filmmaking, but remains a central part of narrative building in its written form as

well. Whilst remaining diligently attentive to fieldnotes and interview transcripts, ethnographers whose primary ethnographic output is text can take creative liberty in carefully selecting, distorting, and concealing elements of their interlocutors' lives. Where vulnerability is a condition of the research subject, maintaining anonymity and writing ethnography which carefully weighs on the particularities and generalisations goes a long way in selecting what remains concealed to the reader (Abu-Lughod 1991; Narayan 2008). This too can be considered re-enactment through writing.

Re-enacting scenes that convincingly weigh the particularities and generalisations is one of the most challenging tricks of the trade for the anthropologist. I left the *From the Cubby* screening yearning for more generalisations, wondering if the directors could have zoomed out of the story more, paid less attention to the narrative of the particularities and re-enactment of past events, and focused more on the larger macro-workings of Britain's Tory-led government. In particular, I wanted to know more about homelessness in Canterbury and about the welfare crisis more broadly in the UK. These issues come through powerfully in Nick's story, but perhaps less so in Martin's. Perhaps this resulted in more sensitivity to the genre of memoir.

These limitations aside, the film is a fine example of the wider practices in multimodal anthropology of orienting towards advancing and expanding new pathways of documenting the human experience. Joe and Nick take liberty, playing with the concept of re-enactment by continuously returning to the genre of seeing and vision in storytelling, whilst simultaneously and continuously alluding back to the questions around researcher positionality with which it began. Unquestionably, in this project the ethnographer's eye is partial, which is

encapsulated in the way that the unscripted and scripted scenes were pieced together. This is further exemplified in a quote that the film concludes with: 'The subject is not in the work but in the person who's looking.' Left with this final quote, the tables are turned, and the audience are no longer the spectators, but become part of the re-enactment and collaborative remembrance of Martin and his life.

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