

FORUM: CAPTURING TIME

Carlo Cubero

INTRODUCTION

This section presents 10 reflexive essays from film-makers whose works were screened at On Time: The Biennial Conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society in August 2019¹. These short essays do not follow the conventions associated with film journalism, which would offer the reader a summation of the film's narrative and suggest a critical context for the film. Rather, they offer a reflection on the theme of 'time', drawn from the insights that were afforded by making and screening the films. The intention here is to share with readers different ways in which ethnographic film-makers relate their research to the temporal experience and invite readers to compare and contrast the experiences described here with their own.

In one regard, these essays suggest that the substantive challenges associated with making a film from an experience of participant observation, are not that different from the participant observer that is committed to writing. All of these essays base their findings on the experience of duration in the field in ways that are recognisable to any anthropologist. They connect the experience of learning to the process of accumulating time in the company of people and strive to communicate that sense of acquaintance in their works, rather than draw analytical conclusions based on the efficient collection of data. These essays describe

fieldwork experiences that cultivate a mode of attention that values the rhythms of daily life, the ongoing nature of social relationships, and the different ways in which these processes are materialised.

This collection also speaks to the peculiar challenges that film-making anthropologists face. For these film-makers, the equipment is not a tool to collect data that is to be analysed later. In these accounts, the equipment—type of footage, camera, microphones, etc.—is a constitutive element of the story as well as its medium. These reviews describe how the 'story' (ie. argument) of these ethnographies is communicated as much by the content and symbols depicted on screen, as by the technological conditions under which the material was collected. They also acknowledge the unique capabilities of cinema to represent situations that are not available to the text or the naked eye. This approach characterises the equipment as an enabler of scenes that would not have occurred otherwise and acknowledges the distinctive ways in which these situations are rendered. The films that are profiled in these reviews can be 'read' for their symbolic content and semiotic markers, but they are also to be experienced as cinematic works that communicate a sense of intimacy, pace, and rhythm through audiovisuals. The essays included in this forum display a concern for the film-making process itself, the terms

of the medium, and its effect on the audience. Ultimately, these essays represent the challenges of maintaining a coherence between the projects' anthropological discourse and its presentation.

CURATING TIME

A reference that we had in mind when designing the conference's film programme was Andrei Tarkovsky's writings on the relationship between cinema and time. For Tarkovsky, time is the constitutive element of cinema, its main ingredient so to speak (Tarkovsky 1986). Tarkovsky opposes the characterisation of cinema as a composite art, a 'mishmash' of drama, prose, acting, painting, music (Tarkovsky 1986: 64). He suggests that this characterisation focuses on the superficial features of cinema and does not capture the unique contributions of cinema, the terms of the cinematic experience. Instead, he argues that the cinematic experience is inherently temporal, constituted of and through time.

I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is *time*: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer. That is the power of cinema: 'stars', story-lines and entertainment have nothing to do with it. (Tarkovsky 1989: 63, emphasis in original)

The importance of temporality to the cinematic experience, for Tarkovsky, is analogous to the role that sounds plays in music, colour in painting, character in drama, words in literature, materials in sculptures. The perception of time,

in this context, is experienced by the spectator as rhythm or pace. The spectator's perception of time can be stretched out and compacted in relation to the affective conditions elicited by the experience of the film (ie. heightened moments of activity, of calm, boredom, sequences that recall reverie, that evoke memories, or disorientations, etc.). When Tarkovsky describes his film-making experience, specifically the production phase, he emphasises his attempt to capture a sense of rhythm, beat, pace:

During shooting, therefore, I concentrate on the course of time in the frame, in order to reproduce it and record it. Editing brings together shots which are already filled with time, and organises the unified, living structure inherent in the film; and the time that pulsates through the blood vessels of the film, making it alive, is of varying rhythmic pressure (Tarkovsky 1989: 114)

We drew from these ideas when curating the film programme. The order of the day was not necessarily informed by the content of the films (ie. to organise the films along thematic, regional, or genre conventions), but more by their sense of pace and timing. The selection and scheduling of the films was designed in a way so that each film would lead up to the next one, rather than just present a selection of the 'best' material that was submitted. The goal of the programme was for conference attendants to experience a sense of progression throughout the programme, a storied experience itself, rather than present them with a programme that simply reported on the latest trends in ethnographic cinema.

THE COLLECTION

A common thread throughout these essays is the acknowledgement of the complexities of making a film through participant observation. That is, rather than bring subjects to the camera—sit them down for an interview or bring them to a studio—the film-makers go out to the world and record the interactions that inform their findings. Collectively, these essays suggest the experience of participant observation as a peculiar mode of attention when the film-maker assesses a site for its cinematic value and considers how to render these values. It is an experience of assessing and adjusting to the temporalities of the site, its rhythms, pace, bodies, event-scapes, and historical associations.

A tension that emerges from this discussion is the relationship between the pro-filmic event (ie. the event outside of the film) and the filmic event (ie. the event as it is mediated by the equipment and depicted on screen). These essays take for granted the notion that the equipment does not record or reproduce an event with fidelity, but rather re-creates or re-invents it anew, on its own terms. The technical characteristics of the footage are entirely dependent on the placement of the camera, the type of camera used, its settings, the type and placement of the microphones, the context and conditions in which the piece is screened, etc.

For the film-makers featured in this forum, the gap between the filmic and pro-filmic event represents an opportunity to develop creative story-lines and narrative devices. In Maija Lassila's case, for example, the equipment was used to depict events that can only be depicted with the camera and are not accessible to the naked eye. The experiences of other film-makers suggest that the presence of the camera assisted or provoked pro-filmic events that later became integral scenes in their story (Isabel

Bredenbröker). Other film-makers describe their experience with using different types of footage to communicate multiple temporalities within their films. Digital footage, video, and celluloid have specific visual characteristics that differentiate them from each other such as speed, grain, and size of frame. Using different types of footage on a single film breaks the temporal consistency of the piece, which results in a film that operates on different temporal registers. For Roger Horn and Zoe Aiano, the usage of different formats (video, digital footage, and celluloid) presents an opportunity to explore a sense of remembrance and nostalgia associated with their informants. The contrasting footage also offered the films' narratives a sense of a projection towards the future, an optimistic indication of future times to come. The goal is not to confuse, trick, or mislead the viewer. The techniques described in these instances are designed to be self-evident and apparent. These approaches make a case for ethnographic representation as creative practise, an open-ended authored piece, the result of a series of intersubjective relationships, rather than a positivist report on social relations.

The reflexive essays featured here also display a concern for the ethical implications of their approaches. On the one hand, documenting an event carries associations related to freezing, arresting, capture, or the death of an event. The process of recording a scene can be seen as analogous to the practise of turning an event into an object of research, arrested and framed within a specific moment in time; as if disciplining the event into a specific scheme. This approach, in turn, carries associations with the colonising gaze, presentism, and re-contextualising its temporal features. At the same time, however, the experience of a screening carries associations of enlivening an event through repeated viewing. A screening

can be experienced as the re-enactment of an event, which offers an audience the opportunity to experience the scenes, discuss them, and consider alternative readings for them. A post-screening discussion, from this perspective, can be seen as an instance where these tensions are talked through—the filmic and the pro-filmic, the relationship between content and form, the affective and the intellectual, the colonising and the liberating gaze, anthropology as an institution and as an approach, the arresting and enlivening process of filming and exhibiting, to move and to be still.

In closing, I would like to point out that the essays in this collection do not offer a referenced definition of time. However, their approach suggests a sense of temporality that is not ‘clock-based’, defined into measurable units. The temporal experiences described here emphasises a sense of lived time, a sense of duration that is perceived intuitively. A sense of time that can be stretched out or slowed down according to the rhythms and tones of the scenes. This approach resonates with Bergson’s descriptions of the temporal experience, which prioritises qualitative beats, continuous concatenations, and a sense of unfolding continuity (Bergson 2014). For Bergson, this sense of duration cannot be described with words. It is apprehended, perhaps, through states of consciousness, corporeality, and the flow of imagery. In the

reviews that follow, the practises associated with producing and consuming ethnographic cinema are described as temporal experiences that are mediated and enabled through technological devices that, in turn, generate a temporal experience for their audience. Ultimately, these reviews make a positive case for the value of audiovisual ethnography, describe the potential of cinema to go beyond illustrations of culture, and reminds us of the self-referential qualities of anthropology.

NOTES

- 1 The conference’s Film Programme was curated by Ingrid Nielsen and myself. Both of us are affiliated to Tallinn University.

REFERENCES

Bergson, Henri 2014. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. London: Routledge.

Tarkovsky, Andrey and Kitty Hunter-Blair 1989. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press

CARLO CUBERO
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL & CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
TALLINN UNIVERSITY
carlo.cubero@gmail.com