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Introduction

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Introduction

Curating Film in Ethnographic Exhibitions

Anne Mette Jørgensen

- 1 In recent decades, technological innovations and rising media consciousness have enabled a hitherto unseen use of video-screens and film projections in ethnographic exhibitions and museums. Films are no longer relegated to run in separate screening rooms, to serve as simple illustrations to the exhibited objects, or to decorate without further function. Rather, contemporary ethnographic museums increasingly use audio-visuals as central installations in their own right and seek to exploit their communicative benefits in appealing to the senses in ways alternative to what displayed objects, still images or written texts can do. At the same time, we work as curators and filmmakers within constraints as to what is practically and economically feasible. In practice, exhibitions are always products of collective and complex processes involving negotiation and unforeseen constraints and therefore pragmatic compromises.
- 2 With this special issue we, the authors, aim to explore this interdisciplinary field of curating film in ethnographic exhibitions and museums from aesthetic and theoretical, communicative and methodological perspectives. We want to explore and discuss this long-existing but largely unarticulated field, a half-bred academic and a half-bred technical and communicative one. How do films contribute to enhance audience experiences and anthropological insights in exhibitions? What do the moving images do to ethnographic exhibitions, to their aesthetics, to the perception of time and space, and to the communication of different ways of living? Both film and objects appeal to our senses, so can they be arranged in ways that mentally our museum visitors across time and space? What are the aims, ambitions and preconditions for those who produce and curate films for ethnographic exhibitions? What may we learn at this point from these experiences? It is a wide field as we explore what to gain from curating film in ethnographic exhibitions. When we held the seminar 'Film in Ethnographic Exhibition' at the National Museum of Denmark in October 2015 we therefore invited curators, filmmakers and scholars to exchange creative experiences and to analyse and reflect on the field. From that seminar and from ensuing debates results this special issue¹.

Films, Objects and the Senses

- 3 Anthropological filmmakers have for over a century striven to exploit the strong potentials of audio-visual technologies for cross-cultural communication. Modern ethnology museums started to apply films as early as 1903², only five years after the initial use of films in an expedition and six years after the invention of the portable film camera. Early 20th century anthropological films were largely the achievements of expeditions to faraway places, which recorded visual material while also collecting artefacts and variable types of data. Many of the large old ethnographic museums have been built on these collections, and this forces us to reflect continuously, as does Mary Bouquet in her article, on what cultural baggage such convergences of moving images and ethnographic museums entail? Co-curation with source communities has led to new types of exhibitions that focus on the very process of collaboration, sometimes including new collecting practices that mirror the original objects (e.g. Gabriel 2016, Petersen 2008). Bouquet criticises arguments that decolonization and democratization of travel have deprived the basic *raison d'être* of ethnographic museums. On the contrary, she argues, they have managed to develop new content that matters and now contribute to processes of reconfiguring difference, diversity and citizenship. She describes how film have played a significant role in the development of a range of major Dutch museums, either by expanding the museum with films on the internet³, by films about museums and exhibits being produced, or by films transforming the very historic buildings, the sites of exhibitions, through immersive installations. The operating characteristics of new technologies and their effects on ethnographic exhibitions is also one of the major themes in the article by Colding et al., who in particular reflect on the impacts of using 360 VR and how this may affect our sense of reality. Digitization has added web-based databases, electronic games, video-conferencing and other innovations to the museum experience. These may provide feedback solutions and enable dialogues, sensations and sharing of knowledge across spatial and cultural distances. When dealing with film and exhibitions we are inextricably led to reflect on multiple media, as an ever renewing field of technology, continually expanding the variation of sensorial engagements.
- 4 David MacDougall pinpoints the relation between ethnographic film and the material world when he writes “if ethnographic films convey the non-linguistic features of culture, they do so not through a process of translation but by a process of physical engagement. In a sense ethnographic films do not ‘mean’ anything, but neither do they mean ‘anything’. They situate us in relation to objects, deploying what is suggestive and expressive in the world” (1998: 266). In ethnographic exhibitions we may even say that objects and film mutually contextualize each other, often in sensorially engaging ways. There are significant communicative differences between written contextualization on tablets and display signs, or in headphones and audiological ‘diving bells’, or in the medium of film. In some ethnographic exhibition spaces words may at times be best left out, even though as scholars we can barely contain our desire for explanations.
- 5 In recent decades, anthropology has increasingly acknowledged sensorial engagements as integral both to our methodologies and epistemologies and it has contributed to restoring material culture – largely marginalized in the discipline for at least a half century – to the research arena. New theories on material culture take very different shapes from the typologizing and schematizing approaches that swept anthropological museums in the

formative decades of our discipline. Anthropologists such as David Howes (1991, 2003, 2014, 2016), Paul Stoller (1989, 1992) and Tim Ingold (2000) are among pioneers who recognize our sensorial engagements with our environments as defining our being in the world (Ingold 2000). David Howes welcomes the fact that the senses are “(back) at the heart of anthropological inquiry” (2016:174). He interprets this partly as a reaction against Clifford Geertz’ widely adapted notion of cultures in the 1970s as ‘ensembles of texts’ (1973: 452) and against the excesses of post-modern textualism following the anthropological ‘crisis of representation’ as debated for instance in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). While it pertains to any media, Howes locates a ‘new visual anthropology’ that treats film and photography as primary documents, and abstains from seeking for an ideology, history or other interpretation ‘behind’ or in a ‘more profound’ reality. Instead, these are incorporated in the aesthetics of the film itself⁴.

Sensing Along With Our Subjects

- 6 Films and objects can be arranged to facilitate open-ended visitor experiences in the ethnographic exhibition. Arnd Schneider has probed the convergences between art and anthropology in his numerous works⁵, and with Christopher Wright he proposes that the boundaries between the disciplines are particularly blurred in the field of moving images (2010: 15). The experimental and sensory approaches of ethnographic filmmakers resonate with those of the artist, who, in turn, is likely to use the moving images to document or explore the world around her. Specific areas of fieldwork, ethics, the senses and materiality feature strongly in recent encounters between art and anthropology, and as Schneider convincingly argued in his keynote at the Copenhagen seminar, these have rich potential for museum work with time-based media. He likened these artistic engagements with anthropology and with interventions in museums to unfinished scripts that await further development. In my view, the best ethnographic exhibitions rest on and sustain such epistemological openness and invite audiences not simply to read a narrative but also to engage sensorially and critically with the exhibition and its elements.
- 7 At the same time ethnographic films or exhibitions always involve a struggle to mediate between different ways of sensing the world. Howes claims that “there is no ‘innocent eye’, or ear, or nose, etc.” (2016: 177), and that it is through our ‘feeling along with’ people in our fieldwork that we as anthropologists learn to understand and communicate differences in sensory perceptions. Stoller brings the point of culture specific sensation further as he locates a Eurocentric visualism (1989: 9). He describes how he came to realize through successive fieldwork among the Songhay of Niger that “taste, smell, and hearing are often more important for the Songhay than sight, the privileged sense of the West. In Songhay one can taste kinship, smell witches and hear the ancestors” (Stoller 1989: 5). Exhibitions can smell, they can sound, but we rarely see them offering experiences of taste, and they certainly privilege vision. We are time and again confronted with our own limits when moving in between experiential spaces. Further, when we use film and other media in exhibitions we often do so because we strive to push these limits but, as pointed out by Colding et al., technological developments, multiple authorship to the exhibition narrative and unforeseen circumstances add multiple junctions and layers to the exhibition. We have no option other than to act as we learn.

Immensity and Intimacy – Films Recreating Museum Spaces

- 8 The articles in this special issue all reflect on film as sensorial engagements, but the exhibition spaces vary widely. Mary Bouquet analyses the extensive application of films in the recently refurbished exhibitions at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, and reflects on the role of films here ‘transforming the space of representation itself, on sites that are loaded with history’. She contextualizes the National Museum of Ethnology as a physical space, and as the expanded form that it presents through the internet.
- 9 In contrast to the large national museum Janine Prins describes how one can make a virtue of organizing a modest exhibition space. Limited space may imitate the private and appeal to more intimate sensorial engagements. Drawing on her own family’s colonial history, Prins installed her very personal exhibition ‘Legacy of Silence’ as an imitation of her deceased aunt’s apartment in Brussels. She created an intimate space for memory works as physical engagements with objects from events, places and spaces, some of which she herself had not even known about before. Prins installed numerous video-screens and projections in the apartment, and in her article she credits Mieke Bal for recognizing how they may enhance visitors’ realization of the divide between the ‘here and now’ – famously opposed to the filmed ‘there and then’ by Walter Benjamin (see e.g. Dant and Gilloch 2002: 9).
- 10 These exhibitions each represent extremities on a scale of size, and juxtaposing them may evoke reflections on how we can creatively rethink our museum spaces, and what roles film can play to enhance the qualities of the museum, its representation, exploration, and communication in order to augment human cognition and understanding.

Aims and Purposes

- 11 The seductive powers of moving images are strong. When entering a room where images move on a screen I always find myself gazing in that direction first, and only after that do I observe objects, texts or other elements in the room. The eye seems to be seduced by movement. It is a fact that we may make positive use of, yet it should also call for caution and reflection. For instance, the beauty of the images may distract from the messages that we want to deliver (Schneider and Wright 2010: 2). Mary Bouquet brings forward how support for the cultural sector, including ethnographic museums, has declined in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, causing most of these museums to subscribe to a commercial experience regime. The sensorial approaches and the seductive qualities of film may be exploited to attract larger audiences and thereby resonate well with current demands of increasing audience numbers. Exhibitions have to be appealing, but if beauty appeals and attracts audiences, how do we find room to communicate messier, or simply more nuanced, images of the world? These realities demand curators, more than ever, to be conscious of our aims and our purposes as well as the contexts in which we communicate.
- 12 Anthropologist Ton Otto (2018) has described how anthropological films – because they offer glimpses into alternative ways of living – may nudge us to reflect on how we organize life for ourselves; in other words they may serve as cultural critique⁶. Enhancing

knowledge about specific topics is another widespread strategy and virtually all the authors in this issue provides productive examples on how acquiring knowledge goes well along with sensorial experiencing. In each of the articles we are invited to consider how films serve to communicate human experiences, relate with objects, and deal with cultural difference. 'Generating dialogue' or 'creating space for dialogue' seems to be a key, in an inspiring variety of ways.

Generating Dialogue

- 13 Janine Prins describes how she invited people into her aunt's re-organised apartment to find their own paths and explore the interior, read and smell old letters, touch inherited objects, watch film projections and video screens, and dwell in the furniture while drinking Indonesian coffee and tea. In other words, she invited them to enter into a dynamic dialogue with the very exhibition aesthetic. In a deeply personal production process over a period of nine years she filmed members of her own family born in the Dutch East Indies, untangling a colonial legacy, until then subject to layers of taboo. Such 'emancipated spectatorship' casts audiences in roles as performers and agents, on a par with the multiple videos, objects and the site of the exhibition itself. Instead of writing a fixed narration for a film as originally planned, Prins chose the medium of an exhibition to evoke reactions to her own family history through the objects in the apartment, collected here by her deceased aunt Trudy during a lifetime. As Prins' exhibition avoided a linear narrative some audiences perceived it as a fragmented place, yet when they invested time and effort they recognized that the varying media and materialities complemented each other and a principle of montage made its effects.
- 14 In another article, Colding et al. report that the montage strategy also augmented the level of sensorial engagements of their audiences and thereby enhanced dialogic engagements. At another level, in a methodology of collaboration and feedback, the producers of the exhibition entered into a dialogical process when editing scenes from the private homes of their film subjects. Every edited version of the film went through a process of approval or disapproval and subsequent alterations, albeit limited by narrow time schedules.
- 15 Experimental ways of generating dialogues with audiences have been widely applied in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. Most notably, the curators have invited citizens – and visitors – to tell their personal stories through objects and video recordings. The intentions of the curators has been to establish a museum contact zone (Clifford 1997), to activate empathy and reflection and loosen stereotypes through the use of multivocal and reflexive films. They continue to invest great effort in creating such spaces of open dialogue, reflexivity and polyphony. In one part of the exhibition, a media station with a touch screen offers a film portrait of a young woman as a collage, intermingling with her community's 800 year's history of migration from Italian Tyrol. Minorities have received particular invitations, and curator Nadja Valentinčič Furlan describes how, for instance, LGBT persons co-curated dynamically changing exhibitions on their lives, employing their own objects, photos, texts, as well as filmed interviews. Some of these life-stories appear impossible to express other than through autobiographical experimentation.
- 16 Curator and visual anthropologist Karin Leivategija describes how the new Estonian National Museum that opened in 2016 has also installed substantial visual material on an immense number of video-screens and film projections to contextualize both old and new

objects in the ethnographic exhibitions. Because of the complexity of people's cognitive worlds there are certain topics that the author feels that films can communicate better than objects. Furthermore, film recordings are here applied with a specific intention of bringing original museum objects 'to live' by filming them in use in historical reenactments. Leivategija describes and analyses the methods that 'support the concept of dialogue-creating' in the sense that dialogue is here perceived as a desired outcome of peoples' receptions of the films and exhibition. The museum exhibitions serve towards integrating Estonians despite diverging or even contradictory perspectives and hereby 'to create a ground for dialogue in society'. A further intention is that they serve to mentally liberate the Estonians who still remember all too well how life was before independence, regained only in 1991 from the former Soviet regime. *Stories of Freedom* must have been an obvious choice as the subject and title of Leivategija's own permanent video exhibit in the museum.

- 17 In such widely varying ways the authors share a view on films as potentially engaging dialogues either in the production process, in the exhibition experience or as a product of and inspired by this experience. Film seems to be particularly well-suited to create open-ended and sensorial engagements and therefore, at best, to enhance openness towards understanding what is yet unfamiliar.

Curating Film in Ethnographic Exhibitions

- 18 Seminar participants in Copenhagen in October 2014 repeatedly brought forward the need for forums to debate our various yet parallel experiences on curating ethnographic films and the variety of methodological, aesthetic and political issues that we are here intrigued by. The current issue aims for the first time to articulate this field of interdisciplinary collaboration. The seminar also reflected that the position of the ethnographic museum curator can at times be rather challenging, and although historical, state-level and institutional contexts for the described and analysed ethnographic exhibitions vary, it became clear that as curators and film producers we share experiences widely. Multi-disciplinarity is a precondition for incorporating film in ethnographic exhibitions and both ethnographic curators and filmmakers are by definition multi-skilled hybrids who must master the most recent developments within our academic fields, the escalating variety of technological means available, the social and cultural competences to collaborate with source communities, the empathy essential for engaging in "ethnography, the science of the thought system of others" (Jean Rouch in Fulchignoni 1989: 299), the communicative skills *vis à vis* audiences on the web, in the museum, and more.
- 19 The museum field is currently under heavy pressure right across Europe, and the numbers of ethnographic curators seems to have stagnated. The field of ethnographic filmmaking, on the other hand, expands as the growing number of programmes in visual anthropology, of ethnographic film festivals (Vallejo and Peirano 2017), of publications on visual anthropology and even of publications of anthropological films (e.g. Jørgensen, Storaas and Waage 2017) demonstrate. This special issue promotes both fields, and for me, producing and curating ethnographic films and exhibitions appears more urgent than ever before, as the world sees so many conflicts associated with cultural issues. Communicating how 'others' live and how they sense the world is not only a matter of living peacefully together. It is also a matter of living better lives because it enables us to

find new ideas and knowledge and thereby solve some of the wider social, ecological and economic challenges of today.

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NOTES

1. I will express my warm gratitude to the anonymous peer reviewers who have contributed to enhance the quality of this special issue considerably. I also thank *AnthroVision* for accepting this issue for publication. Nadja Valentinčič Furlan deserves my deep gratitude for insisting on bringing this publication into the world, and for her enormous work with communicating and organizing the process. I also want to thank the participants in the October 2015 seminar in Copenhagen, the National Museum for hosting it, and the University of Copenhagen and the Independent Research Fund Denmark for financial support. The three keynote speakers Mary Bouquet, Stephen Köhn and Arnd Schneider each added their essential perspective to our newly conceived field and thereby encouraged us to continue our work with this publication and in the field of producing and curating film for ethnographic exhibitions.
2. See Bouquet in this issue.
3. Valentinčič Furlan, in her article in this issue, reports that the number of visitors on the Slovene Ethnographic Museum's website and social networks exceeds the number of visitors to the museum building by 15 times.
4. Howes here refers most prominently to David MacDougall's *Doon School Chronicles* (2000).
5. These include, but are not limited to, four recent anthologies (Schneider and Wright 2010; Schneider and Wright 2013; Schneider and Pasqualino 2014; Schneider 2017).
6. The concept of anthropology as cultural critique was first used by Franz Boas' students, in particular Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, who deliberately used their field studies to compare American ways of life critically with those of other societies. In their much cited 1986

publication Marcus and Fischer redefined the very purpose of anthropology to be cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

ABSTRACTS

Curating film in ethnographic exhibitions and museums is a long-existing, hybrid and largely unarticulated field that this special issue now sheds light on. The contributors reflect on how ethnographic film may intensify sensorial engagements, raise levels of curiosity and comprehension, and enhance mediation between different ways of sensing the world. Dialogue and montage are guiding principles to several of the contributors writing about their own curatorial work and/or filmmaking. They expand on dialogic collaborations with subjects and audiences in different stages, from production to exhibition and beyond. Following from that, the guest editor concludes that curating and producing ethnographic films and exhibitions is methodologically, practically and politically complex and highly urgent.

La présentation de films dans les expositions ethnographiques et les musées est une pratique qui existe depuis fort longtemps mais cela reste un sujet hybride largement inexploré que ce numéro spécial souhaite mettre en lumière. Les auteurs de cette édition réfléchissent à la manière dont le film ethnographique peut intensifier les engagements sensoriels, accroître les niveaux de curiosité et de compréhension et améliorer la médiation entre les différentes façons de percevoir le monde. Le dialogue et le montage des expositions et des films sont les lignes directrices choisies par plusieurs des contributeurs pour décrire leur travail de conservation et/ou de réalisation. Ils s'appuient sur des collaborations dialogiques avec des sujets et des publics lors des différentes étapes qui vont de la production à l'exposition et au-delà. Enfin, le rédacteur invité conclut que la conservation, la production de films et d'expositions ethnographiques sont méthodologiquement, pratiquement et politiquement complexes et doivent être soutenus d'une manière urgente.

En este número especial se da a conocer la conservación de documentales en exposiciones y museos etnográficos, un campo híbrido, que existe desde hace tiempo y que está muy poco articulado. Los autores reflexionan sobre cómo el cine etnográfico intensifica las interacciones sensoriales, incrementa los niveles de curiosidad y comprensión y mejora la mediación entre las diferentes maneras de percibir el mundo. Los diálogos y el montaje son los puntos de partida de algunos de los autores que escriben sobre su propia experiencia como conservadores o cineastas. Abundan en las colaboraciones dialógicas con temas y audiencias en las distintas etapas, desde la producción hasta la exhibición y más allá. De ahí que el editor invitado concluya que conservar y producir documentales y exposiciones etnográficos es complejo desde el punto de vista metodológico, práctico y político, además de muy urgente.

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Palabras claves: exposiciones y museos etnográficos, documental, los sentidos, diálogos, carreras cinematográficas y de conservación

Mots-clés: expositions ethnographiques et musées, film, les sens, dialogue, carrière de conservateur et de cinéaste

Keywords: ethnographic exhibitions and museums, film, the senses, dialogue, curatorial and filmmaking careers

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