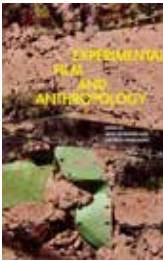# Books

General

Arnd Schneider and Caterina Pasqualino, eds., *Experimental Film and Anthropology*

London: Bloomsbury, 2014. xvi + 205. 61 b&w illustrations, contributors, index of names. Paperback, $29.95; PDF eBook, $25.99. ISBN 978-0857854438 (paperback); 978-0857858221 (eBook).

EXPERIMENTAL FILM AND ANTHROPOLOGY represents a profound and welcome paradigm shift for visual anthropology. Together, these essays challenge dominant conventions of anthropology's engagement with film and photography and look critically at assumed relations of knowledge, sensation, and representation that are of broad significance to cultural anthropology as a whole. The collection is distinctive in that nearly all its authors both make and write about films. They are firmly rooted in anthropology, yet engaged with "film's own *experimental* avant-gardes." That is, with "the genealogy of experiments with film's form and material in several pre- and post-avant-garde movements (such as in abstract, futurist, surrealist, absolute, and structuralist film)" (1).

This emphasis on materiality is a distinctive and immensely valuable aspect of the book in an era when everywhere digital technologies assert the post-medium condition. In sharp contrast, these essays focus principally on analog formats and processes (chemical photography and processing, super-8mm and 16mm film, hand cranking, cameraless animation). In an age when media is digital and commonplace, this analog focus might seem arcane, of interest only to the most artsy subset of ethnographic filmmakers. This is not the case.

Experimental Film and Anthropology addresses the discipline broadly. Through engagement with practice (both anthropological and film) and audience reception

(which includes film subjects), the collection creates common ground on which to explore such concerns of contemporary theory as critical phenomenology, the senses and emotions, representing time, memory, performance, possession, and trance (in cinema, theater, ritual).

In their introduction, the editors outline "a subversive agenda … set against the foil of visual anthropology" (5). This subversion consists of critical insight deployed in fertile experiments that challenge the most basic assumptions of "a broad realist-narrative paradigm that—with few exceptions—has dominated visual anthropology so far" (1). By subverting dominant practice, the book serves more to reanimate the field of visual anthropology than to topple it: the experimental agenda is neither totalizing nor destructive. Rather, it embraces experiment as a process of inquiry, offering a panoply of alternatives to conventional ways of doing and thinking about visual anthropology. Anthropologists who make films will probably want to read most every chapter. Even those with a more general interest will find fresh insights into ways of thinking about, gathering, and representing anthropological knowledge and the experiences of ethnographic subjects.

Two classic strategies of modern avant-gardes for breaking free of conventional habits of perception have been to embrace constraints and limits (formal, material) and work across boundaries (film/photo, eye/ear). The experimental works that make up this collection adopt both to shake free of narrative realism and an aesthetic founded in "an obsessive and titanic search for continuous perfectibility of image quality" (165). Martino Nicoletti, for example, explains how his choice of old, analog, media, including low-quality consumer formats, informs a "visual media primitivism" in which "'limits' are actively turned into 'opportunities'" (167). Jennifer Heuson and Kevin Allen explain that they value the "limitations in non-synch technologies … in relation to the dominance of synchronous 'point-and-shoot' media" for the way they "persuade us to rethink sedimented assumptions about" the established dichotomies of eye and ear (123).

Arnd Schneider challenges the binary of film and photo as opposites of movement versus stillness in a masterful essay on the photofilm. Photofilm is a genre "at the crossroads between film and photography" (27), in which sequences of photographs are filmed with motion picture camera, "reanimating" them through camera moves and other filmic and sonic effects. Schneider surveys three photofilm practices in very different ethnographic contexts: Leonore Mau's and Hubert Fichte's work on Hamburg dockworkers (1966) and a Portuguese fishing town (1968); HAVILAND (2009), who reanimates photos taken in 1977 of tar-making by two Guugu Yimithirr men with conversations about the photos recorded in 1982; and Dick Blau's *A Polish Easter in Chicago* (2011; see http://dickblau.com/film/ [accessed 1 December 2016]), composed of stills and a sonic collage of atmospheric sounds, liturgy, and birdsong.

Against preconceptions of cinema as an art of description, Nicole Brenez marshals the films of experimental filmmaker Robert Frenz, who exploits the properties of silver print (density, variability) and "resolutely abandons systems of objectivism" to the irreducible and incomparable vastness of phenomena. Brenez argues that Frenz subverts realist orthoscopy and attests "our presence in the world" through

"solo-forms linked to a political relationship" in ways that speak to the premises of anthropology (70–76).

Other works in the collection engage the constraints of cultural distance alongside those of medium and format. For example, Robert Ascher turned to cameraless animation (drawing directly on clear motion picture film) because he believed "live action film-making within a culture is invasive and frequently perpetuates misreadings … instead of sympathy," as Kathryn Ramey elucidates in her rich survey of Ascher's film work (99). In a similar move, Barbara Glowczewski, who stopped filming Warlpiri women's rituals due to cultural taboos around images of the deceased, writes that these constraints propelled her exploration "of how to convey anthropological observations: not to 're-present' them but to change perceptions and preconception" (154).

The collection also disrupts realist-observational narrativism in several essays that question the material processes of perception, and explore the connections of experimental film to trance, dreams, performance, and memory. Caterina Pasqualino connects the techniques of experimental film to the possession techniques that bring about altered states of consciousness among practitioners of the Afro-Cuban religion she studies. Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr reflect on their personal experience of films to argue that validity in anthropological cinema ought to be understood in terms of the effectiveness of "the cinematic shock rather than the perceived correspondence between cinema and the real" (79). In her work on memory practices in post-communist Romania, Alyssa Grossman used objects (donated by her subjects) and stop-motion techniques to generate film images that "evoke the sensory, affective aspects of recollection," "to emphasize memory's generative, constantly evolving qualities, and question the use of documentary images as an easy means of calling up a static past through mechanical processes of information retrieval" (133, 136). In the final essay of the collection, the only one that looks explicitly at digital media, Nadine Wanono brings the focus on materiality full circle to compare the grain of analog film to the digital pixel in order to underscore the aesthetic and political choices embedded in our technical apparatuses, and urge awareness of their power to guide perception and imagination.

In the spirit of avant-gardism, *Experimental Film and Anthropology* withdraws the narcotic of assumed meaning from discourses around visual anthropology and furnishes a wide range of new models for extending ethnographic practices of film and photography beyond narrative and illustration. In a world where making and sharing all kinds of media has become routine, it is salutary to read of people thinking and practicing in a different way. I found the book a bracing tonic, well worth the demands of time and attention, and have already incorporated it in my teaching of film as a method and mode of ethnographic inquiry.

REFERENCES

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