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# Rendering Culture

-Elsewhereness, The Ethnographic, The Surreal

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Where are the ends of ethnography? I will take the point of departure for addressing this question partly in research I'm doing with Tom O'Dell, and partly by relating it to the artwork Elsewhereness, which is a series of site specific experimental films, that I did together with Anders Weberg.

## **From writing culture to rendering culture**

The role of ethnography and its relation to writing practices has been scrutinized within the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology in various ways for some decades now. It is over 25 years since the launch of *Writing Culture*, the volume edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, which aligned ethnography with the so called literary turn. During the recent years discussions about the meaning and the impact of the writing culture critique and debates during the 1980's has been going on in various fora.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent article that I wrote together with Tom O'Dell we argued that ethnography can be seen as a practice of composition. We we're inspired by Bruno Latour's *Compositionist Manifesto* as well as Christopher Kelty's writings about collaboration, coordination and composition (2009). Kelty has advocated that the word composition might capture the complexity of activities that are the result from ethnographers today using a plethora of digital tools based on the infrastructure of the internet:

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<sup>1</sup> George Marcus has for an example looked back at the the developments of anthropology and ethnography in relation to "writing culture" in some articles (2007, 2008) In the volume *Beyond Writing Culture: Current Intersections of Epistemologies and Representational Practices* (2010) edited by Olaf Zenker and Karsten Kumoll the contributors relate the book from 1986 to subsequent practices.

We say ‘composition’ here because it is more inclusive than ‘writing’ (paintings, musical works, and software all need to be composed, as poetry and novels do). Writing implies the textual and narrative organization of languages..., but it leaves out the composition of images and sounds, or especially how other kinds of objects are composed as part of an ethnographic project...(2009:186).

In our article we stressed ethnography as a process consisting of multimodal and sensuous practices, and possible connections between art and ethnography. We were partly drawing on George Marcus’ thoughts on intellectual montage.

A couple of decades ago George Marcus argued for ways of coupling cinematic imaginations to ethnographic writing, and modernist sensibilities in ethnographic writing (1990). By discussing *intellectual montage*, a concept derived from filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, he discussed experimental ethnography at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the uses of polyphony, fragmentation and reflexivity in writing. At the core of these experiments lay combinatory montage practices and creative juxtapositions (O’Dell and Willim 2011:30).

We also pointed at the possibility to jumble the metaphors or to re-imagine how we conceptualize ethnographic work.

We think of the formation of texts in terms of continuous “rewriting”, while the making of films involves cutting, splicing, and editing, and music may awake association to the layering and remixing of sound. How might we mix the practices from these different forms of creation and expression in order to think of ethnographies in terms of cutting, editing, mixing and layering as well as re-writing?(ibid).

A way to further stress this point is by refocus from *writing culture* to *rendering culture*. Rendering fits well with seeing ethnography as composition as well as a multimodal practice. Composition focus more on ethnography as a creative process than as a representational practice. Here our thoughts resonate with the approach Phillip Vannini took in his book *Ferry Tales*, where he wrote that:

I am less interested in ethnographic *representation* than I am in ethnographic *creation*. (...) because research is more than representation, my writing and analysis aims less at explaining "findings" and more at *rendition* – aiming to create new stories, rather than replicate old ones (Vannini 2012:28).

The focus on rendition and composition highlight the potential of experimental ethnography, but it also highlight practices of *worldmaking*. This resonates with some arguments brought up by John Law and John Urry in the article *Enacting The Social* from 2004. They argued that social science is performative, that it helps making worlds. Social enquiry and its methods "do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it"(Law and Urry 2004:391). Methods always interfere with that which is studied. The examples they present are among others Michel Callon's writings about how "*theories* of markets have been crucial in helping to produce the realities that they purportedly describe"(ibid:394).

According to Law and Urry ethnography can "help to make worlds". This could mean ethnography as a force of production, or if we use the language of the business world or applied research, ethnography as leading to "actionable results". But let us again turn to the question: where are the ends of ethnography? I would like to turn to one of my artworks called *Elsewhereness* to indirectly address this question.

How do you make an account of a place you have never visited? This question is the point of departure for the *Elsewhereness*-series. The series is an Internet-based art project consisting of a still growing number of experimental films, each film imagining a city never visited by the creators.

I initiated Elsewhereness in 2008 together with video artist Anders Weberg. The series can be seen as a meditation on questions about site-specificity and the ends of ethnography.

I have been working together with Weberg since 2003, creating works with concepts derived from my practices as an ethnologist and ethnographer. The audiovisual arrangements of Elsewhereness, as well as our other common works, are based on Weberg's dreamlike, organically fragmented visual language combined with my sound compositions. The basic idea behind Elsewhereness is to form an imaginary geography based on films associated with cities that we have never visited. The parts of the series are made solely from audio and video material found on the web, material that emanates from a specific city. The audiovisual pieces are manipulated and composed into a surreal journey through an estranged landscape, based entirely on the culturally bound and stereotypical preconceptions we have about the actual location. The separate parts has been showed at exhibitions or screenings in respective city. The films are also available for download.

Elsewhereness could be seen as a surreal account of fieldwork practices, juxtaposing ideas about site-specificity with technological mediation and appropriation. Here I'm partly inspired by writings on site-specific art, like Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another*, and also by the ways ethnography has been in interplay with artistic practices. An early text dealing with this topic is the article *On Ethnographic Surrealism* by James Clifford from 1981, in which he wrote about the connections between budding ethnographic practices in Paris between the two world wars and the relations to art and surrealism.

The boundaries of art and science (especially the human sciences) are ideological and shifting, and intellectual history is itself enmeshed in these shifts - its genres do not remain firmly anchored. Changing definitions of art or science must provoke new retrospective unities, new

ideal types for historical description. In this sense "ethnographic surrealism" is a utopian construct, a statement at once about past and future possibilities for cultural analysis (Clifford 1981:540).

Elsewhereness can be seen as an alternative way to approach the boundary-work going on when fields and places are called forth through ethnography. It is a way to provoke thoughts on locations, relations and the more than representational.

However, it should be said that Elsewhereness is not an attempt to epistemologically or methodologically pinpoint the practices of ethnography or anthropology. The series is an experiment in rendering, evoking a parallel world that is ephemerally connected to the cities that are alluded to in the various episodes. It is a way to play with the limits of ethnography and the site-specific and to address processes of worldmaking. I will show one episode from the series, the one made for *The Impakt festival* in Utrecht, Holland.( <http://vimeo.com/15796129> )

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