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Applied Cultural Analysis: And the Compositional Practices of Rendering Ethnography

Tom O'Dell & Robert Willim

Kitchen Stories, the Norwegian film written and directed by Bent Hamer, takes its point of departure in the activities of the Swedish Home Research Institute which concentrated the majority of its work (in the period between 1944 to 1957) upon the study of women's routines in the kitchen with the goal of rationalizing those kitchens and the activities of the women in them. In the film we meet Folke, who has been assigned, with ten other researchers, to go to Norway to study the way in which single men use their kitchens. Sitting on two meter high chairs placed in the corners of these Norwegian men's kitchens they are expected to observe, take notes, and draw up diagrams of what happens. Both the scholars and the men being studied are given clear instructions: the observers must be allowed to come and go as they please; they must not be spoken to; and must never be included in the daily chores or routines of the people they are supposed to be studying. But things don't go as planned.

Isak, the elderly man Folke is supposed to observe, has a change of heart. Regretting his choice to volunteer for the project he refuses to allow Folke to enter his home, and it is only after several days of patiently waiting outside that Folke is allowed entry. After a few days of being observed, Isak secretly turns the tables on his observer, and drills a hole in the ceiling just above the two meter high chair Folke sits in. From his bedroom closet on the second floor Isak can now peer through the hole and watch what Folke is reading, writing and drawing in his notebooks. Isak even goes so far at one point as to begin sketch diagrams (in Folke's own diaries, and without his knowledge) of Folke's movements in the

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kitchen. And while Folke is not aware of all the activities going on around him, he is sure of one thing – things aren't going as planned, and they don't seem to be going very well. But slowly the relationship between the two men begins to thaw, and despite clear instructions, they do begin to speak to one another.

Elsewhere in the village another researcher, Green, has gone so far as to begin drinking with his “study object”. Late one night, having run out of alcohol, Green comes to Folke to “borrow” a bottle or two. Folke reprimands his colleague, reminding him that they are not allowed to drink on the job. Whereupon Green replies:

[ext] Not allowed to drink. Not allowed to talk. Shit, Folke, what the hell are we doing? We sit up there on our pedestals and think that we understand everything. How can we think that we can understand anything about people simply by observing them?... We have to talk to each other. People have to communicate...

Folke: Our research is based upon a positivistic approach.

Green: Positivistic? I've decided to quit. That's the most positivistic thing I can do. /[end ext]

Green turns and stumbles away into the dark. Feeling slightly bad, and sorry for Green, Folke shouts out into the night, “I've talked too! I've talked to my host too!”

Kitchen Stories is a warm humorous film about the relationship between two very different men from two separate Scandinavian countries. For ethnographers interested in applied cultural research, however, it is an interesting reminder of one of the few earlier arenas in which applied social or cultural research was conducted in the Swedish context. As it turns out, applied forms of cultural analysis have a rather shallow history in Scandinavia in general, and in Sweden more specifically. Sure, there were scholars such as the Myrdals who

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gained international recognition for their work, but they were more of the exception than the rule. And when applied research was conducted, it tended to be quantitatively oriented – fixated with the activity of experts measuring, graphing, and counting their object of study. This is perhaps not so surprising in light of the fact that over the course of the 20th century engineers were the people who were generally held up as the “experts” to turn to, to solve the nation’s problems, and so when researchers from the social sciences were enlisted to alleviate social and urban problems, their work tended to follow suit with that of their peers from the schools of engineering and natural sciences, taking a highly positivistic and quantitative approach.

In recent years, however, the situation has begun to change, and new forms of applied cultural research are taking the stage. In what follows, we shall begin by briefly sketching out the development of a new field of study, called Applied Cultural Analysis, which is expanding in Sweden and other parts of Scandinavia. As part of this process, we are currently working to reframe ethnography as a compositional process, and the second section of this chapter explains what this entails. We conclude by providing examples of some of the different ways in which we are teaching, and rendering ethnography as a compositional practice.

[H1] Moving towards the realm of the applied

The Post-war period in Sweden was a period marked by the rapid expansion of the middle-classes which was facilitated by a slew of social policies implemented by the Social Democrats aimed at more evenly distributing the wealth of the nation in a manner that would

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allow for such an expansion. But beyond this, it was also based upon a belief that knowledge could lead to change (Frykman 1981). And while organizations such as the Swedish Home Research Institute, did come into existence, the bulk of research being conducted in Sweden was funded by the government but conducted under the auspices of the university system. Where applied forms of anthropology developed early in the 20th century in the United States, nothing of the sort ever took hold in Sweden.¹ Research emanating from departments of ethnology in Sweden was firmly anchored in the academy focusing upon the mapping of peasant traditions and the spread of folklore. In this sense, they had a rather positivistic ambition of charting cultural processes, and pinning them down to demonstrate how the state of “Swedish culture” really appeared (Ehn & Löfgren 1996). A shift, however, occurred in the early seventies as influences from American anthropology and French cultural theory (from scholars like Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu) captured the imagination of a new younger generation of ethnologists who even began using their work to provide a voice to weaker groups in society (cf. Arnstberg 1997; Daun 1970). Ethnologists who did not remain in the academy usually found they could apply their knowledge in Swedish museums and cultural institutions. But work in the private sector was viewed with deep skepticism.

This situation was at least partially turned head over heels in the years around the new millennium with the advent of two interconnected phenomena. On the one, hand the Swedish government began pressing scholars to explain how their knowledge could be made useful for society. And here it was primarily marketable assets that the government was interested in. And on the other hand, many students increasingly began enrolling in programs that led to clear career paths (O'Dell 2009). Student interest in ethnology rapidly dissipated. Where an introductory course in ethnology could attract close to one hundred students at

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Lund University in the mid-1990s, teachers found themselves meeting as few as six students in the classroom ten years later.

Where the old motto had been, “Publish or Perish”, ethnologists were increasingly facing a new one of “Adapt your educational program and change your attitude or perish!” In Umeå, in the far north of Sweden, a program in “Cultural Entrepreneurship” was established. At the other end of the country, in the far south, an international Master’s program in Applied Cultural Analysis (MACA) was developed collaboratively by the departments of ethnology at Copenhagen and Lund universities. The proximity of the two universities (both located in the Öresund Region) provided a golden opportunity to develop a program in which students would move back and forth across the sound participating in lectures held in both Denmark and Sweden. Organizationally, each department accepted twenty students to their portion of the program. But the two departments had slightly different acceptance requirements: where the Danes had stricter requirements for students with backgrounds in ethnology and anthropology, we in Sweden recruited a broader student body of people who had had exposure to cultural theory but perhaps majored in subjects as diverse as art history, business administration, journalism, and ethnology.

A number of challenges quickly made themselves felt. The mixture of students with different scholarly as well as national background meant that they brought a wide array of skills, competencies, and experiences with them, but how can one best harness all of this and guide the group down a path that over the course of two years leads to the development of a new type of ethnographer: not an anthropologist or an ethnologist, but a cultural analyst specialized in working in applied contexts. Pedagogically, they had to learn a common core of cultural theory to use as a point of departure for their discussions with one another, but they

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would also have to learn a set of practices and inquisitive dispositions that would fit under the banner of “applied ethnography”. Disciplinarily however, we deeply understood, and still believe that this necessitated providing them with a different education than they would receive in any other department of anthropology or ethnology in Scandinavia.

[H1] Cultural Analysis and processes of composition

In order to do this we could not simply abandon our backgrounds and past experience. This would have to be an important platform from which to begin to work. As Doreen Massey has pointed out in discussing the need for cultural theorists to more thoroughly investigate the borderland between culture and economy, this should be done in a manner that does not turn cultural theorists into bad economists, but which allows them to do good cultural analyses of economic issues – don't abandon your background, but embrace it and move it in new directions (Massey 1999).

As it turned out the diversity of the student body complemented the mode of analysis which Swedish ethnologists based in Lund had developed since the 1980s. Doing cultural analysis in Lund implied maintaining an eclectic theoretical disposition combined with a slightly different approach to ethnography than that found in more traditional forms of European anthropology. Theoretically, impulses were readily absorbed from a broad body of cultural theory from geography and gender studies to philosophy and beyond in order to grasp and understand often overlooked and inconspicuous processes of everyday life (Ehn & Löfgren 2010). Methodologically our focus has seldom been on the immersive long period of fieldwork, so often evoked within departments of anthropology. Instead our methods have been characterized by a kind of bricolage approach. Where academic anthropologists

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generally regard ethnography as a means of studying other people over an extended period of time (Moeran 2005:3), Swedish ethnology has increasingly aligned itself over the years with those who believe ethnography is best defined as a plurality of methods, better understood as “based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques” (Davies 2008:5).

We have embraced ethnography through historically anchored fieldwork or serial forms of it rather than long periods of continuous fieldwork (cf. Bergquist & Svensson 1999; Ehn & Löfgren 2010). The shift towards serially organized fieldwork amongst ethnologists was in part facilitated by the fact that the demands placed on scholars studying their own cultural surroundings were different than those faced by scholars entering less familiar contexts (Labaree 2002; Öhlander 1999:74f.). Where anthropologists worked to understand Others and make sense out of the different ways of life they observed, ethnologists usually engaged the ethnographic process by first attempting to exoticize the segments of Swedish daily life that they observed in order to distance themselves from it so as to then understand the practices they were observing, and the emotional impact it had upon them (Arnstberg 1997:24; Ehn & Löfgren 2001).

From the perspective of anthropology, questions have arisen about the degree to which ethnography must be closely associated with participant observation (Sillitoe 2007:156), and how long one actually has to work “in the field” for one’s work to qualify as ethnography (Pink 2004:9). As Sunderland and Denny have argued, “We once bristled over short lengths because they conflicted with the assumption in anthropological research that understanding requires considerable time...//...yet we bristle less now... [due to] a realization and appreciation that sometimes length does not matter” (2007:267). Many of us working

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within ethnology were well accustomed to the idea of doing fast and dirty field work. A weekend at a car meet, a day at a boardroom meeting, or an afternoon at a horse race, these were all accepted ways of working. The short duration of the ethnographic encounter was not a problem in and of itself since it could be combined with a wider bricolage of materials and theoretical perspectives. In developing MACA the bricolage method of doing cultural analysis which we had developed in ethnology seemed to be not only a natural way of moving, but even a productive and good way of de-dramatizing notions of the exoticism of field encounters, and the appropriate length of fieldwork.

The problem with entering the field of applied cultural analysis was not bound to issues concerning the duration of fieldwork, it was one of moving students with rather different scholarly backgrounds from a point of naïve empiricism to analytical insight. In line with this, an important challenge which we believe applied cultural analysis must meet is one of moving ethnography from the world of text to a more multimodal set of practices. Here we have developed an approach where we see ethnography and cultural analysis as compositional practices.

What does this mean? At a very trivial level it implies an emphasis on teaching students that methods cannot be separated from theory. They are entwined and must be taught, treated, and used as such. In the academy ethnography is all too often treated and taught as a textual practice, despite the *Writing Culture* exchanges about moving beyond the text (Clifford & Marcus 1986). What happens if we shift the metaphoric register of our discussions away from writing and into the realm of that which we can compose? Here it is possible to draw inspiration from Bruno Latour's *Compositionist Manifesto* (2010) as well as Christopher

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Kelty's writings about collaboration, coordination and composition (2009). As Latour points out:

[ext] Even though the word 'composition' is a bit too long and windy, what is nice is that it underlines that things have to be put together (Latin *componere*) while retaining their heterogeneity. Also it is connected with composure... it is not too far from 'compromise' and 'compromising' retaining with it a certain diplomatic and prudential flavor (2010: 3)

[end ext] As we see it, a problem with the traditional anthropological view of ethnographic practice is that it still creates an all too linear impression of how ethnographies are assembled: moving from the planning stages at the desk, to the extended period of fieldwork, and back to the desk or the write up. Thinking of ethnography as a compositional practice allows us to accept them as messy, non-linear, performances in which diverse bits and pieces of information are put together and moved around.

Kelty, for his part, has advocated that the word composition might capture the complexity of activities that are the results of ethnographers today using a plethora of digital tools based on the infrastructure of the internet:

[ext] 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).[end ext]

As we see it, applied cultural analysis has to engage to convince. It needs to connect to the senses in a very different way than the latest book from a "top university publisher." You cannot ignore the importance of text, or the form it should take in different contexts, but

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ethnography has to be considered more seriously as a multimodal process. Here, we are partly drawing on George Marcus' thoughts on intellectual montage. A few decades ago he 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 20th century and the uses of polyphony, fragmentation and reflexivity in writing. At the core of these experiments lay combinatory montage practices and creative juxtapositions. But his vision of intellectual montage does not go far enough. We need to jumble our metaphors more to re-imagine how we conceptualize ethnographic work. We think, all too often, 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 or even the looping of sound segments. 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? Rather than viewing the realities that force many of us to conduct short stints of fieldwork to gather ethnographic materials as a weakness, it might be more productive to teach students that they can actually layer different types of materials and theoretical perspective as well as using previous encounters with the field as a point of departure for ongoing projects.

[H1] How Do You Compose Ethnography?

Composing ethnography means working in a manner akin to what Kim Fortun has urged us to engage in, an "ethnography in late industrialism". That is an:

[ext]...ethnography that "loops", using ethnographic techniques to discern the discursive risks and gaps of a particular problem domain so that further ethnographic engagement in that

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domain is responsive and creative, provoking new articulations, attending to emergent realities. Ethnographic findings are thus fed back into ethnographic engagement. This mode of ethnography stages collaboration with interlocutors to activate new idioms and ways of engaging the world. It is activist, in a manner open to futures that cannot yet be imagined (Fortun 2012:460). [end ext]

The looping that Fortun mentions can be related to the activist strands she evokes. But it is occurring in a number of contexts. In the world of applied cultural analysis people are often conducting relatively short periods of ethnographic work for clients. They often let previous studies inform current and coming studies. Knowledge, experiences and findings are looped or reiterated between the projects conducted by ethnographic consultants.

Fortun is concerned with the manner in which ethnographic findings are fed back into ethnographic engagement. Through our engagement with applied cultural analysis, we have found numerous examples of similar practices amongst anthropologists and ethnologists working outside of academia. These are people who have often specialized their work in a limited number of empirical areas. One practitioner, for example, is very adept at conducting cultural analysis of media and the manner in which they are used and perceived by people in the course of their daily lives. Another applied anthropologist emphasizes his skills in both the study of food and cell phones, while a third person is very focused upon issues of sustainability. Within these empirical areas their knowledge and findings were constantly being reiterated and looped.

In order to see this work as a compositional practice, however, we even want to stretch the idea of looping within ethnography to compare it to the practices of other creative work, like music making. When creating music with digital media the sound clip is a piece of sound

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that can be manipulated, stretched, layered and looped; the looped sound result in a pattern that can be altered through various subtle or more dramatic modulations. The addition of sound effects (like echoes, reverb, filters, etc.) can create surprises or different atmospheres. This we argue, is essentially what we do as we sift our data through a variety of theoretical perspectives and continually work to help clients understand their products and services in new ways that they can in part recognize, but in part have never seen before.

Composing ethnography also often implies teamwork. Where traditional anthropological fieldwork implied the movement of a single anthropologist into the field for a longer period of study to “get it all”, composing ethnography can imply several people working together, and here it can be an advantage to work with people with different cultural backgrounds and academic educations. To once more refer to the world of music: a marching band, for example, needs coordination, teamwork, and discipline. But if everyone wants to be the tuba player, it’s not much of a band. So composing ethnography also implies a need to appreciate and utilize multiple and different competencies, and to coordinate them. To this end, MACA students spend the first year of the Master’s Program working in groups. This often creates friction and causes problems in the beginning, but over the course of the year students learn that the art of composing ethnography requires a large degree of group management and the skill of appropriately delegating work and responsibilities to group members. Learning the managerial skills of the composer and conductor, are in other words, part and parcel of the competencies we strive to imbue with students with. And here we strategically work with the diversity amongst our students as a means of honing this ability.

Along the way, as students move ever closer to obtaining a degree, they are urged to consider their work as applied cultural analysts in terms of “cultural dubbing” – which we

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envision as a move that forces the ethnographer to change both the voice and register of a cultural representation in order to make an impression. As such, cultural dubbing is not a single analytical act, but a poly-morphic transformative movement that involves processes of both transcription and translation, but also moves beyond them. It is a process in which academic knowledge is translated into boardroom language, accentuated with terms derived from business administration text books, and presented, not as a two hundred page text, but as a powerpoint presentation with eight slides and a video. It is also a process in which the “business pitch” or “final presentation” is viewed as much more than a representation. In order to be successful, we argue, it should be an emotionally laden *evocative performance* that aims to engage and convince. And even here, the art of the evocative performance is a talent students are forced to confront, learn, and experiment with in conjunction with their course work on theory, methodology and project management.

These are just a few of the ways in which we are working to emphasize the compositional characteristics of ethnography. A way to further stress the shift we are advocating is by refocusing the thrust of our activity from one of *writing culture* to one of *rendering culture*. Rendering fits well with seeing ethnography as composition as well as a multimodal practice. Composition focuses more on ethnography as a creative process than as a representational practice. Even as the realist ambition is always to some extent incorporated in ethnography. Here our thoughts resonate with the approach Phillip Vannini took in his book *Ferry Tales*, where he wrote that:

[ext] 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

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explaining "findings" and more at *rendition* – aiming to create new stories, rather than replicate old ones (Vannini 2012:28). [end ext]

The focus on rendition and composition highlight the potential of experimental ethnography to align itself with applied contexts, but it also highlights practices of *worldmaking*. This resonates with some of the 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 contributes to the process of 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". The point is that the composition of ethnography can lead to very different forms of "deliverables" depending upon the context. Composing ethnography is not an activity done by academics *or* practitioners; it requires a relational appreciation of ethnography as being something which must take different forms and make use of different utterances in varied contexts. It requires a bricolage approach to the melding of analytical/theoretical perspectives with materials, but it also necessitates the development of performative techniques often not addressed in traditional anthropological courses: including, but not limited to the oral and visual skills needed to engage clients and communicate results, the ability to translate concepts and explanations in ways that make them relevant in different contexts, and a belief in the ability

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of cultural analysis to provide solutions (and in this way to provide deliverables that are more than just representations).

[H1] Unwittingly on the Coattails of Public Anthropology

In many ways the ability to move in this direction was presaged by the shift that we mentioned earlier that Swedish ethnology took in the early nineteen-seventies in which ethnologist realized the role they could play in giving a voice to others. Where American anthropologists began writing about and discussing public anthropology in the 1990s, Swedish ethnologists moved in this direction in the seventies. Important to this shift was a new insistence on the availability of the ethnographic text, and the language of the ethnologist. Highbrow, abstract academic language full of jargon and theoretical concepts was frowned upon. A good ethnography should be readily accessible to any high school student – that was (and is) the motto. Simultaneously, ethnologists moved into the public light making appearances on television and radio programs, as well as being quoted in the daily newspapers. Swedish ethnologists are for the most part unfamiliar with the concept of a public anthropology. Instead, the current generation of ethnologists received their undergraduate and graduate educations in a context in which public engagement and activism was part of the ethnological habitus.

Strangely enough most of the skills required to work in this way were never explicitly taught to students. The movement towards a compositional ethnography is an intentional and explicit attempt to emphasize the manner in which ethnographic representations can be put together in very different ways to produce different understandings depending upon the requirements of the context at hand. Our own work spans the continuum from highly experimental artistic forms of digital representations (such as Willim's piece

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Surreal Scania,² made together with video artist Anders Weberg, that depicts Scania – the southern province of Sweden – in a highly experimental manner intended to provoke the question of the limits of place marketing and its potential) to more conventional documentary style ethnographic video, which is becoming an increasingly common mode of representation used by both students and scholars. But it also includes our participation in the production of twenty minute long “popularly accessible” talks broadcast on national television, and engagement in “knowledge slams” that throw academics, local politicians and entrepreneurs into cocktail party like performances to stimulate dialogue and the sharing/development of ideas and innovations around specific themes. These can be encounters in which ethnographic video, sound recordings, slide shows and staged performances provide a backdrop for the conversation that develops.

The point that we are trying to emphasize here is that composing ethnography requires us to dare to move in different directions than anthropologists and ethnologists have done before. Applied Cultural Analysts have to be highly competent writers. But they also have to train to present their work orally in a manner that speaks to the specific client/audience in question. Thinking in terms of composing ethnography forces us to acknowledge that the “representation of culture” is an important aspect of what we do, but what we do is much more than this.

Applied Cultural Analysis is evocative and multi-modal, it engages audiences in ways that go beyond the realm of the cerebral. To be convincing it has to make the self-apparent seem enticingly, or disturbingly new. Compositions have to engage the specific audience they are addressing. We are arguing that ethnography has to do the same, and highflying, abstract language, thick textbooks, and formalized journal articles are not always

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enough. But this is not just a question about the form or media of what is being composed. It is when ethnography manages to walk the thin line between that which is trivially obvious and that which offers credible insight into a certain field of study (and suggests the thought provokingly uncanny) that it becomes truly successful. The surprise effects, the affective and the sensuous aspects of ethnography have to be kept alive throughout the research process. It's when you feel the composition doing something to your gut, that you are putting the piece together in a convincing and innovative manner. To successfully compose ethnography you have to, in other words, connect **with an audience and not just represent a culture**.

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[H1] Notes and References

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¹ The situation was slightly different in the field of sociology where people such as the Myrdals did conduct work with an applied orientation. The Myrdals, however, were more of an exception than the rule, and even they were tightly bound to the university system. By the early 1970s this type of applied/policy oriented work was at best viewed with suspicion and accorded low academic status, and it consequently fizzled out of existence.

² Surreal Scania can be viewed at, <http://www.surrealscania.se/>. See also Weberg & willims work, *Elsewhereness*, <http://elsewhereness.com/>, which has been featured and conferences around the world and which also works to problematize the notion of place, by producing pieces about places in which the composers have never been, but have partaken of through the internet.