The Nature of Experience in Transcultural Cinema

Nathan Johnston, Ed. M.
Harvard Graduate School of Education
nathanj@post.harvard.edu

Once upon a time, this essay began with a narrative depiction of two high school students engaged in a cross-cultural filmmaking exchange project. Writing it helped me to draw out specific concepts and ideas, and the fictionalized scenario left room for audiences create personal connections to the ideas. Perhaps the first sentence is enough to begin forming images and associations.

How would my process have been affected had I made a short film instead? In what ways could it be more or less ambiguous, descriptive, powerful, subtle, or educational for you, the audience? There's no concrete answer — presenting something visually is no more a guarantee of a certain outcome than a collection of words are at creating poetry. I think it's instructive to focus instead on the qualities of the medium — what is the nature of visual communication, especially in relation to the focus here on cultural awareness? How does the medium embody questions and perspectives? What are the qualities of the medium itself that create particularly powerful opportunities and complex challenges as a means of communication, interpretation, and intersubjective connection?

Film as medium

Image

In a text-based world, images are boiled down to the words that can describe them — descriptions that take on definite and specific meanings. David MacDougall offers that *meaning* is our guide in consciousness, at once capable of opening our eyes to new terrain as well as reducing the world to only what we want or expect to see (MacDougall 2006).

As a constructed medium that can never capture "reality," film operates in a liminal space where our conceptions about the world are negotiated — a place somewhere between sensing and meaning-making. I argue that this is an especially fruitful place for pursuing questions about how we see ourselves in relation to others and providing experiences of transcultural *transcendance* — truly seeing with new eyes.

Narrative documentaries like Helfand and Gold's *Blue Vinyl* (2003) must walk a line between position paper and art film, and as such are useful as a lens for looking at explicit goals of persuasion. Helfan and Gold are clearly hoping to change our minds about vinyl or raise awareness about the broader impact of our consumer choices, but are they really drawing on the power of film to transcend what words can do so well? To extend the question, how do the challenges and opportunities in an observational film like Geyrhalter's *Our Daily Bread* (2005) compare in the area of persuasion and argument?

We ought to follow MacDougall's advice and not simply insist "that we must do a better job of adapting [images] to the rules of scholarly writing. This will lead only to bad compromises. If we are to gain new knowledge from using images, it will come in other forms and by different means" (MacDougall 2006:2). Where is the line where our words must give way to meanings that are in the images themselves? Can we, as Feld suggests, draw on devices of dramatic storytelling without operating in the domain of words (Rouch 2003:10)?

Method and Style

> "At the crudest level, the MacDougalls' refusal of the … "suturing" together of shots from different camera angles into a seamless diegetic whole, does not so much conform to the plain style of realism as it actively contests it" (Lucien Taylor, MacDougall 1998:9).

Film has been exported around the world and wrapped up in everything from scientific inquiry to social development. From Margaret Mead's studies in Bali and Papua New Guinea to the British Colonial Film Unit's use of film as a social tool in Africa, the moving picture has long covered the entire continuum from aesthetic exploration to practical needs and purposes. Rouch lends a developmental view when he suggests that because of the BCFU's work, film became an "essential medium of mass communication," thus creating the conditions for

the "flowering of a typically African cinematographic art…" (Rouch 2003:67).

Film as experience

As American philosopher John Dewey developed his experiential approach to education early in the 20th century, filmmakers like Robert Flaherty were discovering the importance of experience in filmmaking. How can we think about filmmaking and film viewing in terms of what Dewey would consider a meaningful experience, one that both meets the producer and viewer where they are and opens up new areas of knowledge that are personally relevant and valuable to society (Dewey 1934)?

Referencing the experience of filmmakers, David MacDougall offers, "Before films are a form of representing or communicating, they are a form of looking. Before they express ideas, they are a form of looking" (MacDougall 2006:6-7). MacDougall is suggesting that *looking* is the tip of some kind of multi-dimensional iceberg: reaching to both the past and future of every film "product" is a network of dendritic connections that at once emplace the filmmaker and the participants in their creative and intellectual development as well as chart the impact of the film on viewers' future thinking.

Changing Minds
Jean Rouch, who arguably brings together the qualities of looking and experience that MacDougall and Dewey outline, once collaborated on a "fictional" film about racial tensions with an interracial group of students in 1960s Cote d'Ivoire. The revelations and meanings therein for Rouch, his collaborators, and eventual viewers owe something to the situation that the medium itself creates: "Rouch insisted that the presence of the camera, like the presence of the ethnographer, … catalyzes, opens a window …; people respond by revealing themselves, and meanings emerge in that revelation" (Rouch 2003:16).

J.P. Sniadecki's *Songhua* (2007) is at first glance a meditation that meets viewers wherever they are, inviting them to develop their own connections to the world that is being slowly revealed before them. The remarkable quality of this film, however, is the subtle stitching together of diegetic moments and unresolved questions that helps the viewer's questions become more probing as they watch further, not less. Rather than "figuring it out" and stepping back from the dialogue of the film, by the last shot the viewer is engaged aesthetically, artistically, and intellectually.

Pulling back a bit, we see that film itself is situated in social and historical contexts as well as in the experiences of creators, participants, and viewers. Toward a cinema that awakens us to the world and helps us develop more sophisticated and nuanced conceptions of ourselves and others, we need to build on the experiential nature of film and encourage reflection among creators and viewers alike to help turn new perspectives into new behaviors and changed minds. At this intersection of genuine experience and reflection lies a transcultural cinema through which we can continue to learn and grow — a cinema, in view of text-based dichotomies of self and other, local and global, that transcends.

Dewey, John. 1934. *Art as Experience.* New York: Minton, Balch & Co.

MacDougall, David. 2003. Taylor, L. (ed.). *Transcultural Cinema.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

MacDougall, David. 2006. *The Corporeal Image.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Rouch, Jean. 2003. Feld, Steven. (Ed.). *Ciné-Ethnography.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Further References from original paper: "Conceptual Change and Education Theory".

Bransford, John. 2001. *Thoughts on Adaptive Expertise.* Online essay: http://www.vanth.org/docs/AdaptiveExpertise.pdf.

Perkins, David. 1992. *Smart Schools: Better Thinking and Learning for Every Child.* New York: The Free Press.