

EMBARRASSMENT IN ONTARIO

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a short stint of fieldwork in Ontario, I call attention to some difficulties of doing visual ethnography. These include the unique ethical challenges associated with filming; the ambiguity of applied fieldwork; and what happens when you anger the participants of your study. Through an analysis of the changing terrain in visual anthropology, I show how and why a short “ethnographic” video I created did not serve the purpose I had hoped for.

I hit the red circle on my camcorder just as the horse starts to neigh and kick. I’ve already missed the beginning of the event, crucial seconds gone unrecorded. A group of men, four in total, struggle to guide the horse into a trailer. They heave on ropes, grunting with the effort. On my LCD screen I can see sweat beading on their foreheads, dripping from their faces with the monumental effort. The scene is otherwise silent; everything focused on these men, struggling against this gigantic beast, its own muscles vivid and tense. A woman stands to the side, watching the men. Her face is etched with concern. Whether this is for the horse or the men, I’m not sure. I wonder why she’s not helping. She’s easily as large as the men; taller, and seemingly

* This article is meant to be read before/after viewing the short film found online here: <http://www.vimeo.com/14294242>

more fit than a couple of them. I think she's the driver of the trailer. I see a set of keys dangling in her hand, her arms crossed across her chest.

I pan to the side, side stepping for a smoother shot. The horse has forced the men out of position. It's now struggling perpendicular to the trailer's entrance. The men are losing the fight, and I can see them getting tired. Suddenly, in a matter of moments, almost quick enough so I don't catch it on film, the horse heaves and kicks one of the men, sending him flying. He stumbles backward over the railing surrounding an empty paddock, falling harmlessly into a pile of hay. The men shout out to him; he shouts back, rising gingerly.

I jump at a voice behind me. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't film this. They wouldn't want this on tape. Embarrassing situation for them, you understand." It wasn't a question.

A cold dread settles into my skin. I look up and to my right. A tall man stands there looking down at me. He has white hair, which seems premature. He squints his eyes at me, glaring intensely. My dread spreads as I hear the struggle continue behind me; a bout of renewed grunting and cajoling. I thumb the red button on my camcorder, close the LCD panel and turn it off.

"Yes, of course. Sorry about that," I stammer. I dearly hope this hasn't ruined the relationship. What was I thinking? I should have at least asked to film. My face floods beat red with embarrassment. I suppose I feel like the struggling men behind me, who still find a second to glance surreptitiously at me, despite their efforts.

The man behind me must be Dr. Mike Pownall, of McKee-Pownell Veterinary Services, in the small township of Cavan Monaghan, Ontario. I came to make a short documentary film on Mike and his practice, which specializes in sport horse medicine. Freshly graduated from Trent University with my undergrad in Anthropology, I landed a summer job working on a cultural mapping project. I'm finishing out the contract by producing a series of short films, highlighting and promoting

cultural resources in the area. I contacted Mike weeks ago, hoping to get an interview. It took a lot of follow up to finally get access, and now I think I've bungled it before it's started.

"Hi, Mike?" I try to sound innocent, as if I haven't been filming his customers for the past five minutes. I guess I figured, since Mike had already agreed to participate, that he would have notified everyone on the premises.

"Yes, you must be Matt," he replies. We don't shake hands. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't use that footage for the movie. It's not exactly the best promotional material. And my clients here wouldn't want anyone seeing their trouble."

"Of course, no problem. Sorry about that, I just figured I'd start filming while I was waiting..."

Mike cuts me off. "That's okay. How do you want to do this?" He speaks quickly. I can't tell if that's just how he talks, or if he's impatient to get me out of here.

Immediately my mind jumps ahead. I think of the finished film, and how this is going to affect what the audience sees. Will they be able to tell I pissed off the main character before I even properly met him? Will the audience interpret his terseness in a negative way? What will they think of me, the filmmaker, and the way in which I obtained the footage?

I suppose I shouldn't complain though. It was my fault for not bothering to ask permission. Isn't this the kind of stuff I had read about? Always ask permission. Never assume anything, especially when you're using film. Don't try to be unobtrusive; it doesn't work. There's nothing objective about filmmaking. By engaging with your participants you develop a relationship based on trust. In this case, I had neither engaged with the people I was filming nor participated in the event. I had simply stood off to the side, silently filming them as they grappled with the horse. I felt ashamed of myself. I felt I had immediately failed to put into practice all I had learned as a student.

But then I thought, what if Mike had not been bothered? Perhaps there was the equal chance that he wouldn't have cared, or even thought it was a *good* idea to film the event. Maybe it

was the type of action he had envisioned for the piece, and if I hadn't proceeded to film without asking, he would have thought I missed out on the best footage I could have obtained that day. After all, there was no opportunity to ask permission, considering the men were busy enough without me waltzing up and pestering them with questions: "excuse me, do you mind if I film you? What do you think of this camera in your face? How are you feeling at this moment? What do you think of sport horse culture?"

My doubts settled back in. I had better be on my best behaviour. I meekly follow Mike into one of the buildings on the site, after the men finally get the horse into the trailer, closing the door and nearly collapsing on one another. For the next half hour I film Mike helping a client; her horse is having trouble with one of its eyes. This client seems unperturbed by my presence. I can only assume Mike requested her permission before I arrived, as the question of access never arises during the brief appointment. The client leaves quick enough and then I am alone again with Mike. He cuts an imposing figure as he towers over me in the dimly lit building.

"What do you want to do now?" he demands of me.

I have to ask. I have to get the project done, after all. "Maybe an interview?"

"Sure. Where?" His tones are clipped now. I sense impatience, but I'm still unsure. The finished film is somewhat disjointed as a result. Boring. The audio rises and falls with his voice, which is quick and sharp, loud and impossible to slow down. I had to insert the best pieces of the diminutive seven-minute interview I could. That's all he would give me. I still wonder what the audience gets out of the video. Is it informative, or is it distracting?

I struggled with what I had read about in my research on visual anthropology. Can this video be considered ethnographic? Or, to put it better, how ethnographic is it? I had attempted to use my academic skills while making the film. The problem was, I wasn't even sure what skills this project required. My boss told me he had specifically looked for an anthropology graduate. He

obviously wanted me to use my specific training. So when making a film, how do I know I'm informing the method with ethnographic theory? What exactly makes an ethnographic film? I conducted an interview. I observed an event, and participated as far as I was allowed. I did the ethical thing, and didn't use the embarrassing footage. In the quotes I used from the interview with Mike, I attempted to maintain a balance between directly relevant "ethnographic" and commercial, promotional material.

I suppose what I did was more along the lines of what's been called "applied visual anthropology." But then again, I've never really been able to tease out the intricacies of these various definitions. To most in the outside world, who have very little or no knowledge of the steps recently taken in visual anthropology theory, the differences in genre are trivial. It was all the same to those I filmed. I was a student with a camcorder, and the training I had received meant little beyond the final product. My participants wanted to look good on film, and if what I had read about visual anthropology helped them do this, so be it. Otherwise, it was all irrelevant.

The film lacks a narrative. I think that's the main problem, and one that reaches beyond visual ethnography; it concerns social science in general. Anthropologists study such fascinating people, are privy to such incredible stories, yet end up writing unbelievably boring books. We are storytellers, yet we seem to have forgotten how to tell stories, in a way anyone but a professional academic understands. Telling an interesting story is all I had wanted to do with the film; what came out was something sterile, devoid of life.

Visual anthropology used to prize such unimaginative films, when anthropologists still thought they were scientists. Esotericism was social capital; it was a hallmark of professionalism. But we no longer subscribe to such a paradigm. The sub-discipline has moved on. It now values a more aesthetic approach to a subject, and tries to incorporate narrative. In other words, much recent, decent visual anthropology tells good stories, in an engaging manner. In my embarrassment of the moment in

Ontario, I forgot all this, and found what little comfort I could in an outdated model of data mining. I “got” what I needed, and then left. The result suffered.

I finished the short film on a whimsical note. I couldn't think of what else to do. I ended up with very little footage. I wasn't at all sure of what I had filmed. What was its significance, both to those I filmed, and wider theoretical discussions? Does anyone even remember what I considered my blatantly unethical behaviour? I'm left with a flurry of questions, but no answers. How typical. How ethnographic. Like the cat wandering aimlessly around the veterinary practice, looking for a purpose, I had simply passed through.