

# Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz: *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009

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Observational cinema is one of the most controversial forms of visual anthropology. After its inception in the 1970s, it was initially praised as a breakthrough in ethnographic filmmaking. However, since then it has suffered years of neglect and heavy criticism, mostly directed at its naïveté, alleged scientism and illusion of objectivity. The time has finally come for a revision of those claims, and this book does just that: it defends observational cinema as a special form of ethnographic filmmaking, which has its history, distinct tradition, as well as potential for future development. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz bring observational cinema back into the focus of consideration, on the one hand analyzing its key filmmakers and their films, while on the other discussing the term from a theoretical point of view.

The book itself is organized in three major parts, each divided into several chapters.

The first part traces the process of the emergence of observational cinema, beginning with a discussion of two early papers on the subject: Roger Sandall's »Observation and Identity« (1972) and Colin Young's »Observational Cinema« (1975), in which the authors inaugurated the term *observational cinema*. They located the genre within a wider context of European and American filmmaking theory and practice, emphasizing the influence of Italian neorealism on *cinéma vérité*, which is in turn a direct precursor of observational cinema. With his Ethnographic Film Program at UCLA, Young was also directly involved in shaping new generations of observational filmmakers: Herb Di Gioia, David Hancock, David and Judith McDougall, etc. The main tenets of observational filmmaking from the outset were focus on small-scale, lived experience, as well as a particular kind of film aesthetics, which relied on spatial unity of events, duration, continuity, and finally, and perhaps crucially, context. Instead of the traditional directorial control of the filming

process, the camera was supposed to run continually, capturing the details of people's expressions, movement, gestures, as well as language. As opposed to *cinéma vérité* conventions, observational films were »expected to follow from extended, long-term relationships rather than for relationships to function instrumentally as vehicles for »getting« the film« (p. 9). The practice of such filmmaking was deeply rooted in the empirical, calling for observation instead of interpretation. Finally, Grimshaw and Ravetz point to André Bazin and his writings on Italian neo-realism as the key figure in the process of shaping the aesthetics of observational cinema. Bazin rejected the primacy of montage in favor of shooting long, continuous scenes with deep-focus photography. The second chapter of the first part discusses the role of observation in the 1960s American *cinéma vérité* (or *direct cinema*) movement. The movement was the first to introduce a particular way of representing reality, by showing rather than telling, i.e. documentary films no longer provided the viewers with a ready-made interpretation. Instead of passively viewing, the audience was expected to actively engage with the film. Grimshaw and Ravetz provide case studies of three representative films of the era: Robert Drew's *Primary* (1960), Albert and David Mayles' *Salesman* (1968) and Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967). The three films are analyzed in terms of their contribution to the development of observational cinema, stressing their strengths, but also criticizing some of their weaknesses. The distinctive aesthetics of these films, the authors note, was a direct result of the development in filmmaking technology, »most notably the switch from heavy tripod-based cameras to relatively lightweight ones and the ability of filmmakers to record sound synchronous with the image« (p. 24). This made possible the epistemological breakthrough, allowing filmmakers to approach reality closer than before, becoming a part of the process of interaction with their subjects,

rather than being mere observers. In spite of that, the term »observation« is still very often burdened by negative connotations of objectification, detachment, passivity, etc.

The second part of the book deals with the work of Herb Di Gioia and David Hancock, whom the authors consider predecessors of observational cinema in the true sense. The films from their Vermont series – *Dwayne Masure* (1971), *Chester Grimes* (1972), *Peter Murray* (1975) and *Peter and Jane Flint* (1975) – are recognized as possessing precisely those qualities that distinguish observational cinema from earlier documentary forms: lack of explanation, action and drama. Although an innovation in the field of documentary filmmaking, it was not always positively received. Its apparent semantic ambiguity and open-endedness did not appeal to anthropologists entrenched in the habit of textual interpretation. Grimshaw and Ravetz argue for observation as a method in its own right, which has analytical and interpretive value and which stands side by side with the traditional modes of textual analysis. Di Gioia's and Hancock's films are firmly set within the classic Bazinian aesthetic, which, according to Grimshaw and Ravetz, is the most important epistemological foundation of observational filmmaking. They are about »individuals understood in the context of their daily lives« (p. 73). Their style is open, exploratory, the shots long and fluid, the sequences unbroken. In fact, it is the Bazinian tradition and Italian neorealist cinema, rather than American *cinéma vérité*, that are perceived as proper precursors to observational cinema. The ordinariness of the world is to be embraced in detail, resisting the urge to extract, simplify and fictionalize its elements. People are not taken as examples or metaphors of larger ideas, but accepted as unique individuals. Observational cinema is thought by Grimshaw and Ravetz to be a particular kind of knowledge, rather than a firmly defined system of interpretation. In a way, this forces them to admit that it is questionable whether Di Gioia's and Hancock's work is anthropological in the strict sense of the word. That is why it is so ironic that »observational cinema is often interpreted as *the* quintessentially anthropological cinema« (p. 77).

David McDougall's cinema, on the other hand, was from the very beginning anthropologically informed, explicitly dealing with issues such as culture, socialization, modernization, nationhood, etc. McDougall, a theoretician and a practitioner, is a central figure in the book, as well as in the history of observational cinema. In his work, he was interested in the way knowledge was created in the process of filmmaking, in the subjectivity of the process, rather than objectivity. He called for a repositioning of filmmaker, subjects and audience, drawing subjects and audience into the process of filmmaking, stressing that all three sides should participate in a common quest for knowledge. Drawing on the tradition of Di Gioia and Hancock, McDougall sought to create a new kind of documentary film based on participation and collaborative authorship. Grimshaw and Ravetz examine his first film *To Live with Herds* (1972), the films of the

Doon School Project (shot in 1997–1998) and later, in the third part of the book, his *Schoolscapes* (2007). In them, McDougall has tried to explore the possibilities of observational cinema as a new kind of anthropological inquiry. He calls it *visual anthropology*, as opposed to traditional discursive modes of anthropological work. This kind of non-textual anthropology does not aim to resolve all the questions, but creates knowledge based on the observation of social processes, such as education in case of the Doon School Project. Not only does it observe a change in the subjects, but also a change in the filmmaker's own understanding. The author shows multifaceted view of reality, »subverting the notion that intellectual inquiry has either a definitive beginning or end« (p. 109). What matters to McDougall is the act of questioning of the nature of knowledge and the process of its acquisition.

In the third and final part of their book, Grimshaw and Ravetz call for a reexamination of the practice of observational cinema, rejecting traditional criticism which has focused on its technological aspects and truth claims while ignoring aesthetic issues. For many filmmakers and film theoreticians, observational cinema was just a phase in the history of the documentary genre, leading to more sophisticated, reflexive (and participatory) modes of documentary filmmaking. On the other hand, observational mode of inquiry was also criticized by anthropologists, who started to perceive traditional anthropology as visually biased. For them, visualism was synonymous with distance, disembodiment and objectification of the human subject, and as such was considered inadequate for a new era of anthropological inquiry. Grimshaw and Ravetz argue for a new understanding of observational cinema, based on the notion of observation as a kind of »skilled practice« that has »selective training of the filmmaker's attention at its core« (p. 115). Such training also entails a particular editing practice, one that does not impose meaning from the outside, but rather emphasizes the semantic potential of the footage itself. The result, exemplified by the works of Di Gioia and his students, is a special kind of film, for which it is difficult to say precisely what it is *about*, differing therefore from the traditional ethnographic film.

Grimshaw and Ravetz see observational cinema as a distinctive mode of inquiry, based on a phenomenological approach, as an alternative to older analytical frameworks of scientific ethnography and semiotics. Such visual anthropology, as a site for various modes of alternative anthropological practice, underscores the irreducibility of human experience to textual analysis, doing justice to its integrity and uniqueness.

In the last pages of the book, the authors try to sketch a modern line of development of observational filmmaking, namely towards experimental anthropology. They point to the fact that some of the leading practitioners in the field – Eva Stefani, David McDougall, Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor – have taken their work out of the cinematic context and introduced it into galleries, »self-consciously using observational techniques to open up a space between art and anthropology« (p. 138).

Grimshaw and Ravetz provide case studies of several projects that have stretched the boundaries of anthropological interest towards various forms of contemporary art. This has opened up a whole new field for observational cinema, which is no longer seen as a literal and conservative quasi-science, but rather an imaginative and avant-garde art, which, according to Grimshaw and Ravetz, may even lead to a radical reconceptualization of anthropology itself.

In this book, the authors advocate a return to the Bazinian tradition in anthropological filmmaking, emphasizing the aesthetic character of observational cinema and a new understanding of the notion of commitment to reality. This change corresponds to a turn in anthropology itself, away from strict discursive frames toward more exploratory, aesthetically sensitive perspectives. Observational cinema, therefore, does not entail capturing ready-made reality, but an acknowledgment of the fundamental instability of the real and its aesthetic expression. Contrary to the established view of observa-

tional cinema as a style of filming which pretends to be *without* style and objective, Grimshaw and Ravetz argue for a modernist understanding of observational cinema, based on Bazin's notion that realism is not something that is simply found in the world, but is rather actively shaped by art. Mainstream anthropologists have long opposed the openness and semantic ambiguity of observational cinema, viewing observation as nothing more than a preliminary to a proper anthropological interpretation. Grimshaw and Ravetz, on the other hand, advocate observational cinema as a mode of anthropological inquiry in its own right. Far from being a naïve mode of ethnographic filmmaking, it has a hitherto unrecognized potential to participate in new forms of anthropological practice. It is difficult to predict the future of observational cinema, and for that matter its role in anthropology, since »the approach itself has never been fixed or static but continues to evolve and be modified as a consequence of specific instances of practice« (p 80), but readers of this book will surely appreciate its authors' effort in reexamining the nature and value of the genre.