

# Filming as a Relational Practice: Some Personal Notes

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Ongoing draft in constant revision / NOT for wider circulation beyond Leiden University teaching situations.

Comments and questions to the author are welcome! Please write to [peter@redrice.net](mailto:peter@redrice.net)

These notes are an attempt to pick up on some threads that have come up in discussions with students while I was teaching with the visual ethnography team at Leiden in 2016-17, and to try and articulate more clearly some of what I have tried to say in class. They grow directly out of my own experience of working with a camera, and while that experience is shot through with my sense of how diverse and even contradictory are the possible forms one's relationship to the camera may take, it remains nevertheless a very personal interpretation of what is happening, or might happen, in the filming situation. Whether or not it is helpful to you will depend very much on who you are, and what you are trying to do; no two filmmakers, no two films, have precisely the same needs, or the same possibilities.

1. The way in which you film will condition (but not determine) the kind of subject your subjects will (appear to) be, both in the moment when you are filming, and in the film you later make from the material you bring back.
2. The way in which you film is a function of many variables. These include, notably: your physical and psychological “tone” while you are filming; your gestural and physical performance with the camera - how you relate to it as a material object, and a tool; the kind of camera (and microphone, and other physical objects) you are using, and what they seem to say about you (the social and cultural implications of their appearance); and, the extent to which you are able NOT to think about all these things, and simply relate to the people you are filming (i.e. the extent to which your actions and movements and expressions maintain “contact” with them, versus the extent to which they seem to isolate you in an activity that prevents direct and more-or-less continuous communication with your environment and those around you).
3. There is no right or wrong way of distributing these parameters. But the way you distribute them will affect - some times slightly, some times profoundly - the kind of performance your subjects feel able to give before (or even for) you.
4. On one level, your behaviour with the camera, as a filmer, functions as a *model* of how one can relate to oneself, to an object, and even - if you

are part of a crew of more than one - to other people. You cannot impose this model on your subjects, but they *will* react to it. Their reaction may be cooperative, imitative, admiring, critical, condescending, bored, rejectionist. And you will then have to react to their reaction.

5. Documentary filmmakers often seek to conceal, or silence, their “true” intentions while filming (supposing they themselves know what these are...), thus creating (or trying to create) a structural imbalance between themselves and their subjects. Ethnographic filmmakers should probably not do this, except at a *playful* and provisional level, in situations (relationships) where such forms of play might be interpreted, when unmasked, as a form of trust. On the other hand, ethnographic filmmakers should probably accept that their conscious intentions, even when directly expressed, are liable to be persistently misunderstood, just as they are likely to misunderstand why their subjects agreed (and continue to agree) to take part in the film. Acknowledging these misunderstandings in the edit, without hoping finally to dissolve them, is one important way of incorporating the complexity of the filming experience into the finished film.
6. The decisions you make before and while filming - even the simplest ones: what camera to bring, when to take it out, how to hold it, where to stand in the room, whether to smile back when people smile at you, whether to accept a cup of tea or a proposal to stop and join your subjects for lunch, whether to film so as to follow the action, or so as to focus on the structure of the space - all these constitute a tacit *invitation* to your subjects to act in certain ways, and not in others. They express what interests you, what *moves* you, what value you place

on X as opposed to Y, in particular, what value you place on the present moment as opposed to the finished film. Every decision to do something, or not to do something, whether physically explicit or not, contributes to a composite picture of what kind of person you are, and what kind of activity you are engaged in. Your filming decisions are not just about the frame, the rhythm, the focus, that the shot will have when you come to edit your film. They are also - and above all - about how you relate to the people around you in the present: people who either have no “image” in their heads of the film that will possibly result from all this carry on, or an image that is completely different from the one in *your* head. Whatever those images may be, you need to find a way of filming that is physically and socially congruent not only with spending as much time in that space with them as you wish, but also with contributing appropriately (which may be very little, or even not at all, but may also be quite considerably) to the collective emotion that this space exists to gather, whether this emotion is joy, laughter, anger, grief, or some complex ambivalent mixture of some or all of these and more.

7. The attention of the filmmaker is thus inherently and always divided: she has to be wholly focused on the film that is being made, the images that are being produced, otherwise she can be sure they will be the “wrong” images; and at the same time, she has to be wholly in the space where she is, with the other people who are there, or the film will simply register this disconnection. The quality of the film will therefore depend upon her ability, not to make these two forms of attention coincide, so much as to create a dialogue, a form of play, between them. (Perhaps the rhythm of the film has its origins in the rhythm with

which her attention moves back and forward between the present, where she is, and the future towards which all her actions tend - in this movement which is both a mental oscillation, and a very physical (if often subliminal) rhythm, impressed on and working itself out through all the movements and micro-movements of her body). NB: it is probably wrong to assume that such a state of dual attention necessarily makes the filmmaker *different* from the people they film - as if such forms of “split” consciousness were not already a recurrent feature of the everyday life of non-filmmaking people, who also have futures towards which they project, and pasts which continue to preoccupy them.

8. With respect to the present of filming - the filmmaker’s physical activity in the space shared with her subjects - everything she does acts to distribute *roles*, to distribute *agency*, including to herself. Each decision not only determines how X is framed in the shot, but it also influences how X will behave in the present - whether he will smile, scowl, act out, retreat within himself, engage the filmmaker in conversation, engage the person next to him in conversation, conduct that conversation loud enough for the microphone to capture, or so quietly even his neighbour has to ask him to speak up, and so forth. More profoundly, it will - slowly, over time, as the session unfolds - work to *expand or reduce the subject’s sense of himself as someone who can act in this situation*: whether he feels he is a maker of decisions, or someone for whom things are decided; whether he feels the outcome of the occasion is determined in advance, or something he can affect. (One of the commonest problems in documentary filmmaking is to place people in situations where they feel they cannot

act - that is, cannot act independently and creatively, cannot make decisions which *risk changing the kind of situation that this is* - while assuring them in words or signs that that is precisely what you want them to do.) Every filming situation is thus, inherently, a *political* situation. The fact that most of this politics is conducted unconsciously - at the level of body language, affect and reflex, rather than deliberately articulated policy or negotiation - does not make it any less real. It will be there in the film, even if you are not aware of it while filming. When viewing rushes, you should ask not just, Is this well framed? Is this eloquent of the situation? Is this the material I need to make my film? but also: How am *I* affecting these people? How am I drawing them out or boxing them in? What could I change in my way of filming - of being with the camera, and with them - that would make them see the filming situation as a different set of possibilities than the one it seems to be for them currently? A set in which there might be more possibilities on which they would feel themselves ready to act?

9. So I am *not* suggesting that you can or should try to provoke or impose specific actions or behaviour on other people. Some people can do this in certain situations. (If you come from a society with a democratic and/or egalitarian ideology, documentary film practice is a wonderful opportunity to become aware of how far that ideology is compatible with, or even in fact depends upon, the tacit and largely disavowed persistence of authoritarian forms of behavior, and how far these forms survive within your own behavior as a filmmaker.) I would suggest you do not want to be one of these people - that it is not productive ethnographically, cinematographically, ethically, or politically. What I am suggesting is that every filming situation is a complex web of

mutual impulsions and influences, only a very small subset of which are ever likely to become conscious for any of those involved. (Nor should you ever assume that you are likely to be the most conscious of the people involved. Many cultures and sub-cultures cultivate an awareness of body language and unconscious expressivity of kinds more likely to be repressed than encouraged by a European (academic) education. If you feel you are lacking in this area, practices of conscious movement - Feldenkrais or Alexander Technique, for example - can help you recover familiarity with the proprioceptive, kinesthetic and expressive dimensions of your own embodied experience.) You cannot consciously control, analyse and manipulate all these tiny ecologies of behaviour. What you can do is - gently, perhaps gracefully, or perhaps, awkwardly, self-deprecatingly, humorously - use your experience of human relations to modify one aspect of the situation of which you are aware, and see what happens. If you do this gently - tho sometimes also a certain amount of recklessness is needed, not with regard to other people's feelings, but with regard to your attachment to your own project - then if it doesn't work, it is not the end of the world. And if it does work or begin to work, then you can continue down that road and see where it leads. Even in the most controlled situations - and there are interesting situations which can only exist through a high level of control - filming should always retain some minimal exploratory dimension. Otherwise, the film that comes out the other end will be lifeless. You need to cultivate a minimum of unpredictability. If you realise that when you film you are never *surprised* by anything that happens, you need to find another way of filming.

10. Cultivating spontaneity and surprise is *not* the same thing as refusing



to organize your film shoot in advance. The refusal to organize for what you are going to do is, in the end, just another way of organizing what will happen, and not always the most intelligent one. Indeed, it is often grounded in a lack of respect for others, and for yourself. Any aesthetics implies a specific and delicate logistics that makes it possible, and often what appears to us as an audience as extreme improvisation or pure chance is in fact the product of intense preparation and exhaustingly ritualized and repetitive behavior. Even great jazz musicians (*especially* great jazz musicians) study each other's work, carry scores around, practice, rehearse. Anyone can "improvise" - or so we assume. But to improvise *convincingly*, so as to sustain and respect the audience's interest, requires immense preparation, which is often confused with obscure concepts such as "talent". "Just letting things happen" is the most difficult and demanding form of practice, because it supposes that when you do this, you have already cleared enough space within the semi-conscious layers of your personality for something *other than yourself, more than yourself*, to happen. The point of discipline is not to plan creativity in advance; it is to gain some sort of control over all the parts of you that will prevent you from doing anything even remotely creative if you give them half a chance, which are massively reinforced by most of the systems and structures within which filmmakers (in so far as they are obliged to be, or at least pass as, members of an over-educated and over-urbanised transnational elite) live and have to operate, and which - for most of us - can only be disabled (never defeated) by the long and patient exercise of craft.

11. The decisions you make in advance of filming will thus have a determining effect on what happens during filming. They will set limits

to the potential of the situations you create: limits that are at once relational, political and aesthetic. Any aesthetic, any ethic, of filming, implies its own specific organisational needs and constraints. What you need to have is the *right* kind of organization, which will produce the right kind of constraints and possibilities. This means planning in detail those things that need to be planned, leaving unplanned those things that will only be destroyed by being overthought, and understanding very precisely (if intuitively) where the boundary between the two passes for you as a filmmaker. For no two filmmakers is that boundary likely to fall in the same place.

12. Whatever kind of plans you need to make before setting off to film, it is important to spend a lot of time *desiring* the film you are going to make - imagining it, dreaming it, arguing with it, seducing it, reinventing it, destroying it, and starting all over again. The main purpose of *writing* before filming (beyond any external, institutional obligations to produce written plans and documents) is to share your desire with others so that they will become allies to help you get the film made, and not opponents, or obstacles. Writing is an opportunity to say things to yourself that you did not know you were thinking (writing, like conversation, and unlike internal monologue, provides a stimulation to thinking *beyond oneself*, because it is an inherently public activity). Some people need to make very detailed plans in specifically cinematographic terms, others need to write more contextually (about process, subject, place, idea, concepts, etc), others more associatively or indirectly. In all cases, the ultimate benefit is the same: the writing *process* (more than any specific individual written emanation of that process) should, retrospectively, sharpen your comprehension of what

is incidental to your aims and can therefore be given up when you arrive “in the field” and all your plans collapse, and what is essential, not so much to the project, as to your *need* for the project. This distinction will be constantly evolving as the project progresses, and will continue to evolve right through to the end of the edit. But at every point along the way, you need to have the sharpest possible grasp of where that distinction lies *now* for you. If you don’t have that, you are not *in* the process. You are not making *this* film. You are - at best - just, generically, “filming”. You should use writing not to predetermine things that cannot be predetermined, but to deepen and focus your grasp of your own process, and the values and desires that shape it. The more articulate your desire becomes, the easier it will be for you to carry the people you need with you, and the more clearly you will see which people you need around you, and which people you need to avoid.

13. Filming is a form of choreography. You are not just moving yourself - or deciding not to move. By your movement or stillness, you are imparting an impulse, an energy, an invitation, a direction, to the people around you. A filmmaker can be verbally silent, and yet very “directive”. Alternatively, she can be extremely talkative, and at the same time, intervene very little, or only very subtly, in the action around her, in the felt pressures that pass through the situation. What she *cannot* do, is be physically absent. (Unless the camera is filming on its own, or has been entrusted to someone else.) In some situations, the people present are already involved in their own dance, and your task is simply - initially - to fit in, to adapt to it. In others, they are waiting, unsure of what is to happen, and it is *your* lead - your offer - that will give them their first

indication of what the dance might be.

14. Common experience: you love the films of X. You see all X's films. You are going to make a film, and you decide that you want your film to look like X's films, that it would be totally appropriate to the subject you have in mind. You plan to adopt and adapt the rhythm and framing of her shots, and use them to reveal something about your subject that has not been shown before. You understand X's style and process very well, and you know how she achieves the results that have impressed you. You arrive for the first day of filming and you start to work in exactly the way that you understand X to work. When you look through the viewfinder, the shots look exactly as you had imagined they would - maybe even better. But something is wrong. After two hours, one hour, 20 minutes, or maybe immediately - ten seconds after you switch the camera on - you realise you are feeling uneasy, uncomfortable. *You* feel wrong. You know exactly how to film as X would in this situation, you think that X is the greatest living filmmaker, but - YOU are NOT X. X's style is not the result of a political commitment (which you share), a theoretical position (for which you have great sympathy), or an aesthetic programme (to which you are keen to affiliate yourself): but X's style is above all a way for X to make herself feel comfortable in certain situations. It is a product of her own personal history - the way her body distributes physical tension, the way certain emotions and certain memories converge or conflict in relation to certain kinds of objects or people, the masks she has learned to wear in order to operate in society, to avoid certain risks while perhaps courting others, the parts of her own psyche she has learned to repress, and those she has cultivated, perhaps too assiduously. YOU are a completely different

person. You can appreciate what X does when it is transformed into images on a flat screen. Perhaps you appreciate it in part because it is so different from yourself. Perhaps it attracts you because it treats all the problems you personally have to deal with as if they were already solved, or did not exist in the first place. Perhaps you desire to make this kind of film in the same way you might desire to be another kind of person - not one of the others you are, or might be, but an other defined precisely by the negation of those things about yourself that are most ineliminable in you, and which - for that reason, doubtless - you most resent. So here you are now, feeling uncomfortable, and the only way out is to throw all the plans you made - how to frame, how to move the camera, how to interact with the people around you - out of the window. THROW THEM OUT OF THE WINDOW. The only film you can make is the one that starts from you. Follow your instincts. They may be bad instincts, but at least by following them you will learn something about yourself. As for X, there are two possibilities: either she makes the kind of film she makes because she too is following her instincts; or, she makes them that way because she has been taught to repress her instincts and is now applying that talent to filmmaking (leading to a life lived out in an extraordinary state of habitual and unproductive tension, and at Lord knows what personal and physical cost). Either way, there is nothing there for you. Learning to make films - like any other human activity - is about learning to recognise who you can usefully borrow or steal from, and who you have to turn your back on because, however successful their choices are for them, and however much you may admire the result, they can only - now, at this point in your life - lead you into a dead end. The point of filmmaking is not to

transmute ourselves into the kind of public persona we are impressed by, but to come into closer, more intimate contact with all the myriad, deeply unimpressive, but much more “livable” (and, probably, much happier) people we actually are, or might be.

15. It is not an accident if most of the great documentary films that have come down to us in the “direct cinema” tradition<sup>[1]</sup> are films made possible by real and intense acts of friendship: Rouch and his “gang”, Pierre Perrault and Alexis Tremblay, Johan van der Keuken and Herman Slobbe. It takes a very specific, and very intense, kind of pleasure in being with someone else to overcome successfully all the barriers (time, money, energy...) that stand in the way of the making of a film, *and* to overcome, within the film itself, all the barriers that the finished film can so easily erect between that person and their possible audience. It also takes a similarly intense affective contact for the barrier between the filmmaker as author, and the subject as subject, to be at least temporarily disassembled and set aside. For the subject of such a film is always as much, if not more, the author of the film than is the director. In these moments, where affective intensity may be accompanied by a feeling of “solidity” on one level, and of the lack of need for any kind of solidity, for fixed reference points, on another, the relationship may seem to take on a sort of life of its own, independent of either of the parties to it. This is, I think, part of what Deleuze is getting at when he writes about the “becoming-other” of both the filmmaker and his subjects<sup>[2]</sup>. When this sense of trust, or the desire for it, reaches a certain pitch, then the subjects may take hold of the film and turn it into a vehicle, not for their “real experience”, but for the greater, more urgent reality of their own imaginations. If the filmmaker

recognizes this and lets them appropriate “her” project, she may then find her own sensibility refracted and transformed through this encounter, to the point where she not only recognizes fragments of herself in them, but - more importantly - *no longer recognises herself in herself*. It is from this zone of non-recognition that can exist only *between* subjects - not between a subject and an object, or a character and an author - that the film draws its transformative strength. The filmmaker has to forget who she is - to forget all the things she knows about herself - including to forget that she is “a filmmaker”. In this sense, editing the film can then become the reconstruction, or reenactment, of the filmmaker’s disappearance into the film as this mutually (if unequally, and now in her disfavour) imagined fiction - or, perhaps more accurately, the disappearance of filmmaking as a discrete, separate function, that can be possessed by only one person at a time, that is the exercise of some “individual”<sup>[3]</sup>. (Of course, then the problem becomes how to return from this uninterrupted exchange of qualities to some sort of administrative, functional normality. Thus at the end of *Herman Slobbe: Blind Kind 2*, it is only the abrupt separation of filmmaker and subject, projecting the filmmaker outside the frame of *this* film, and sending him off to Spain to work on another project, that enables the film to reach some sort of a “conclusion”.)

16. I am drawn repeatedly to Deleuze’s writings on direct cinema, because they resonate so closely with my own experience of filmmaking as a physical, gestural, spatial activity that is, above all, a way of “modeling” a certain kind of relationality to and with the person being filmed that goes beyond any conventional empirical sense of what is being placed in relationship with what. For me, filming is essentially about giving

the other person a space in which they can explore being a version (or versions) of themselves that they would not normally think to be (through timidity, through lack of curiosity, or of opportunity...), and doing this not in some special space that is marked out and set aside for such “extraordinary” adventures, but *within the mundane texture and process of their everyday lives*. (As such, it is also a way of revealing how the “ordinary” and the “everyday” is already shot through with, and inseparable from, kinds of the extraordinary which we are otherwise encouraged to overlook, ignore, or neglect to develop and strengthen.) I *cannot* do this if I go into that situation knowing in advance exactly who *I* am (I am “a filmmaker”, I make *this* kind of films, I do this, I don’t do that, etc...). This is the area in which planning - or rather, a planner’s mentality - can be dangerous for filmmaking. (As pointed out above, by “planning” I definitely do *not* mean “preparation” or “organisation”).

17. There are two ways of feeling comfortable in a filming situation: one which tends to exclude surprises (you feel comfortable because you have excluded everything that you might find threatening), and one which can help make them possible. You want to try over time to move towards the second sort of feeling. Like all feelings, this openness to surprise - surprises both from yourself, and from others - can be cultivated. Making documentary films in places you have never been before, and with people you have not met before, but who are - fortunately! - not overwhelming to you, is a good opportunity to work on this.
18. Still, if things don’t work, they don’t work. The aim is to cultivate openness. If all you are doing is cultivating a sense of failure, you may



need to decide at some point to abandon this project and find another one with a different social and personal configuration. There is no shame in this. The road to Academy Awards is paved with films that were never completed. In that sense, it is much less demanding than the road to an MA in Visual Anthropology...

Peter Snowdon, November 2016-July 2017, Leiden/Brussels

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## Further reading

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My awareness of documentary/ethnographic filming as a bodily practice was first provoked by Peter Thompson, *Shooting in the Dark: Notes on preparing to film in the field* (Chicago Filmworks, 1995), available online at [http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/files/doc\\_shooting.pdf](http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/files/doc_shooting.pdf)

My thinking about film as an inherently relational practice owes much to conversations with a number of fellow filmmakers over the years, and particularly with Emmanuelle Demoris, Laura Waddington and Julie Perini. See for example:

Emmanuelle Demoris, “Camera con vista” (in French), 2012, available online at <https://mafrouza.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/camera-con-vista.pdf>

Laura Waddington, “Scattered Truth”, 2014, available online at <http://www.laurawaddington.com/writings.php>

Julie Perini, “Relational Filmmaking: A Manifesto and its Explication”, *Afterimage*, 38.4, 2011, available online at: [http://www.experimentalcommunities.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/AI\\_384\\_Perini.pdf](http://www.experimentalcommunities.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/AI_384_Perini.pdf)

1. I follow the French usage of the 1960s and 70s that embraces in this term all the cinemas made possible by the invention of lightweight portable sync sound equipment, including those genres which later authors such as MacDougall would distinguish from direct cinema strictly speaking, such as cinéma vérité. See Louis Marcorelles, *Living Cinema* (New York: Praeger, 1970). ↩
2. See the wonderful section on direct cinema in Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Caleta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 147-55. ↩
3. For more on the idea of filmmaking as a “distributed function”, rather than a fixed role, see my article, ““Film!” –The Arab Revolutions and the Filmmaker as Amanuensis”, *Visual Anthropology*, 2016, 29:3, 263-277. ↩