

## Title

"Documentary's Outsides: Scenes of Encounter in Contemporary Ethnographic Film"

## Abstract

The documentary is a form of filmmaking caught in a double-bind. It is both art and non-art, something fashioned to be a unique object, and something that purports to document some aspect of reality. Its two poles are often posed in contradictory terms: to be valued for aesthetic qualities is often seen to undermine its utility as an instrument of social change, while others see its preoccupation with the historical record as detracting from its artistic merit. The ethnographic film, as a subset of documentary, shares this dilemma. As an extension of anthropology, the ethnographic film has been conceived as another mode of recording and describing an exotic culture in soberly scientific terms. At the same time, the ethnographic film has also taken on attributes of modernist art, reflexively critiquing the presumed objectivity of the scientific approach, seeking out other modes of encounter, and developing new languages of description.

The ethnographic turn in art resonates with long-standing practices and debates within documentary film as well as anthropology. Historically, ethnography was concerned with people considered savage or primitive, spatially and temporally distant from the modern, Western world. Anthropology relied on a series of problematic distinctions: between culture and nature, self and other, and those *inside*, the observing subjects, and the exotic, usually racially determined objects *outside*. In the context of contemporary global capitalism, however, the idea of an outside has all but vanished. Even if economic and political power is still distributed unequally, it is impossible to conceive the dominance of Western nations apart from their dependence on the exploited resources of the global South. A revitalized concept of ethnography, then, as a documentary practice that studies people and cultures, offers an opportunity to map these new configurations and conditions of globalization, war, austerity, and migration. Though this does not resolve persistent problems of ethnographic filmmaking, numerous film and videomakers have responded by shifting their attention away from the description of a given people to focus on the practice of ethnography itself.

This talk contends that ethnographic film in particular has the potential to reconceive the distinction between inside and outside. Film is adept at producing not only a detailed record, but also offers a mode of encounter in its own right. It is both the description and the staging of a scene, bridging the implied distances of anthropology by placing the observer and actor within the same setting. This encounter, in turn, is imbued with sensory, even hallucinatory possibility, as is evident in the films of Jean Rouch, Maya Deren, Ben Russell, Gabriel Abrantes, Joshua Oppenheimer, and the filmmakers associated with the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Laboratory. Early twentieth century ethnographer Victor Segalen described a notion of the "exot," derived from a concept of

the outside (via the prefix “ex”), in which the other preserves a sense of its unassimilability. I examine the ways in which the outside is problematized in a number of contemporary ethnographic and experimental films in which the act of filming, rather than being concealed as an invisible apparatus, is centrally figured. I pay particular attention to the ways in which *sensation* is mobilized as a technologized effect, produced in and through the medium of film. The sensory attributes of filmmaking merge insider and outsider perspectives, and in so doing, produces a third account, or space, distinct from any other.

### **Tentative film screening list**

*For the First Time* (dir. Octavio Cortazar, 1967, 10 min)

source: Cinema Guild, DVD, \$59.95

*We Are Going to Record* (dir. Peter Snowdon, 2013, 11 min)

source: filmmaker, screening fee TBD

*Adieu Monde or Pierre and Claire’s Story* (dir. Sandra Kogut, 1998, 27 min)

source: filmmaking, screening fee TBD

TRT: 48 minutes

### **Bio**

**Genevieve Yue** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Culture and Media at Eugene Lang College, The New School, where she teaches film history, media theory, experimental film, and moving image art. Her essays and criticism have appeared in *October*, *Grey Room*, *Art-Agenda*, and *Film Comment*. She is currently completing a book on gender, film, and materiality.