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**Towards the ethnography of filmic places:  
Video-based research and found footage filmmaking in the  
anthropological investigation of Mexican migrant event video**

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**Towards the Ethnography of Filmic Places**  
Video-based Research and Found Footage Filmmaking  
in the Anthropological Investigation of  
Mexican Migrant Event Video

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the University of Westminster for the degree of  
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Rebecca Savage

## Abstract

This thesis offers an ethnography, with both audiovisual and written components, of the virtual places brought into being through the creation and consumption of event videos in a transnational community. It is intended as a contribution to the development of conceptual and methodological frameworks, which will allow anthropological engagements with vernacular audiovisual media that take into account their phenomenological properties as mimetically active assemblages.

In San Francisco Tetlanohcan, Mexico, young parents often leave their children behind as they cross the border illegally, heading north to look for work. Event videos, made by videographers at rite of passage ceremonies and sent to the USA, are an important aspect of migrant life. This research draws on thinking in philosophy and film studies to conceptualise these videos as agents in a process of ‘filmic emplacement’ as their production and consumption bring into being imagined places and selves.

The project combines methodological approaches borrowed from sensory ethnography with video editing techniques inspired by avant-garde filmmaking, in a dynamic evocation and exploration of these filmic places. Close participation in the creation and consumption of event videos combined with the movement of alternative ‘video messages’ across the border, gave the researcher a sense of these places. Shared screenings of found footage sequences materialised and refined that understanding.

By co-opting the aesthetics of popular television, event videos transform that which they depict, bringing into being collectively created and experienced imagined places. This coherent and constant virtual realm allows for the creation and maintenance of kinship and fictive kinship relationships, despite separations over space and time. The video *900,000 Frames Between Us* produced as part of this thesis uses the juxtaposition of ontologically diverse images and sounds to provide an audiovisual evocation of this ‘filmic home’. In addition to contributing to the anthropological understanding of San Francisco, this thesis suggests ways in which visual anthropologists might engage with and understand the mediated experiences of others.

# CONTENTS

## PART ONE

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>900,000 Frames Between Us</i> (48 minutes) ..... | DVD |
|---|-----|

## PART TWO

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements and Author's Declaration .....  | 4   |
| Introduction .....   | 5   |
| CHAPTER 1: The Anthropology of Filmic Places .....   | 26  |
| CHAPTER 2: Found Footage Films as Ethnographies of Filmic Places .....                       | 60  |
| CHAPTER 3: Exploring the San Francisco Filmic Place:<br>Video-based Ethnography.....         | 82  |
| CHAPTER 4: The San Francisco Filmic Place .....  | 105 |
| CHAPTER 5: Evoking the San Francisco Filmic Place:<br><i>900,000 Frames Between Us</i> ..... | 123 |
| Conclusions .....  | 144 |
| Bibliography and Filmography .....   | 152 |

## Video Appendices

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Disc 1 ..... | Documentation of Video Messaging Project   |
| Disc 2 ..... | ' <i>Mis XV Años</i> '<br>(Example of an Event Video, produced by San Francisco Videographer ' <i>Foto Estudio Esffer</i> ') |

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Finally I thank my family for their encouragement and good cheer, Jenny Curran, Alex Merry, Lion Shahab and Chiara Lyons for creating happy homes, and Evan Thomas for helping to keep things in perspective.

I declare that all of the material contained in this thesis is my own work unless otherwise attributed.

## Introduction

This project began itself, unexpectedly, in an attic in rural England one rainy Sunday afternoon in 2007. I was staying with my parents for the weekend and going through a few boxes of my belongings, which I had been storing at their house. I came across a handful of colourful DVD cases and took them downstairs to see what was on the unmarked discs enclosed. I had spent three months of the last year in Tlaxcala, making recordings for a video to be the final project for my MA in visual anthropology at The Granada Centre, University of Manchester. The project was based in the small town of San Francisco Tetlanohcan (San Francisco), a rural and historically agricultural community, whose population of 10,000 is matched by an equivalent number living in various cities in the USA, most of whom have crossed the border illegally and remain undocumented. My video had focused on the fifteenth birthday celebrations (*Quince años*) of girls in the town. This research suggested that in San Francisco there had been a rapid and profound change in the form of this ceremony coinciding with the arrival of factories and the cash economy in Tlaxcala, and the profound changes in the town as more and more people went North, across the US border in search of work. Whilst the grandmothers and mothers of the girls I filmed had celebrated their coming of age with the killing of a *guajolote* (turkey) and a family meal, the '*quinceañera fiesta*' was now an enormous and lavish celebration.

The video *Tiempo de Vals* (2006) follows several families as they prepare for such *Fiestas de Quince Años* and shows the colourful festivities as they unfold. The video largely adheres to the observational tradition characteristic of work made at the Granada Centre, combining continuity-edited sequences of action with footage from unstructured interviews. More experimental methods are also deployed, however, in an attempt to suggest the connections between fantasy and lived experience that are materialised through the *fiesta*. An important precursor to this research project, my time spent observing and videoing in *fiestas* made the significance of local video practices very clear to me. All of the parties featured in *Tiempo de Vals* were recorded by commissioned videographers with the resulting videos being sent to migrant family members in the US who, because of their

‘undocumented’ immigration status, were not able to attend celebrations in Mexico.

I had come across event videos early in my involvement in the San Francisco community. A shelf of VHS tapes and DVDs from the village was a standard feature in the homes of migrants I had visited in New York and Connecticut. Fathers, and increasingly also mothers, had often headed north in search of work leaving young children in Mexico. Videos were made and sent to parents as children were baptised, as they celebrated significant birthdays, graduated from school and, if they hadn’t already joined their parents in the US, as they married. In the rush to edit my graduation video and a somewhat chaotic move from Manchester to London I had forgotten that all three of the *quinceañeras* I had worked with in making *Tiempo de Vals* had kindly let me have copies of the videos made by the videographers who recorded their parties. I had never found time to sit down and watch these videos and the discs had been packed away at the bottom of the box where I now found them, several months later. I put one of the DVDs in the player and as it began playing, I followed it along the tops of the gently rolling waves and frolicking dolphins, down a waterfall, and eventually dissolved with it into the bright sunshine of an unpaved track on the outskirts of San Francisco.

My mother came in and watched with me as the *quinceañera* paraded through the village streets, which seemed very different to the way I remembered them. The girl, in an elaborate dress with tight bodice and full skirt, was led by a *mariachi* band and flanked by eight *chambelanes* (male chaperones), all dressed in tuxedos and with perfectly slicked-back hair. I had been there at the recording of this scene, I remembered, as I caught a glimpse of myself, looking distracted and hot as I trotted to keep up with the procession, video camera in hand. Although I recalled the day clearly, the scene I saw felt strangely new to me now. As the group entered the church and the mass began, I turned to my mother and attempted to explain to her what was going on. I had lived in the place shown in the video for a year and had described it to my family, showing them photographs and video footage of the village. I had talked to them about the families I had stayed with in Mexico and about their migrant relatives who I had met in the States. I had probably even mentioned these videos and their importance in connecting those migrants to their

homes and loved ones. Yet, as I experienced the video and simultaneously began to unpack it, attempting to orient my mother in this strange place she had inadvertently encountered through the TV screen, attempting to help her connect the dolphins and waterfalls to the dusty landlocked state where she knew I had been living, words failed me. There was interesting work to be done, I realised, in understanding this video and sharing that understanding with people, like my mother, who had never trodden the dusty side streets of San Francisco.

It was clear to me that the only meaningful way to attempt such understanding was to engage with these videos on their own terms, through video itself. A few months later, when a scholarship to study for a practice-based PhD at the University of Westminster allowed me to begin this research in earnest, I realised that attempting to understand the videos in this way would push at the limits of the observational filmmaking practices in which I had been trained. My proposed project would not only force me to find new ways of working, it would provoke a re-analysis of what ethnographic film *was*, and the kinds of knowledge and understanding which it could yield. Thinking about the way in which the event video transformed my relationship with the people and places I had known in lived experience led me to analyse the connections between the video's structure and the lived pro-filmic places that it depicted. As I reflected on my experience of the event video in making a place and time where I had been seem strange and new to me, I came to see the disc, and its flickering images, as what Arjun Appadurai describes as "resources for self-imagining" (1996:4). The self-imagining which the video allowed me as I identified with its images and sounds, created a place distinct from the one I had occupied as I walked beside the *quinceañera* and her entourage. As I moved into the fieldwork phase of the project I conceptualised this 'filmic place' as the primary site of ethnographic investigation.

The importance of the filmic place created by the event video, and its contiguity with the corporeal places of lived experience in the divided sites of the transnational community, is attested to by the huge numbers of event videos that cross the border. On my journeys between the village of San Francisco and the migrant communities in New York and New Haven I have always been heavily laden, tugging gigantic suitcases and sacks. Over several years, as both US and

Mexican customs officers have become stricter and bags have been more frequently searched, dotting mothers and wives have improved their methods of preparation and disguise. Tupperware containers of migrants' favourite meals are frozen solid and wrapped in newspaper and plastic bags. Essential ingredients not available or thought not to taste the same in US markets and shops – dried fish, various types of chili pepper, nuts, and seeds – are similarly wrapped up alongside items of the seasonal harvest. I crossed the border one August with 39 kilos of fresh walnuts, tightly bound into small polyethylene packages, each labeled with a name corresponding to a particular family and a particular tree in a particular field in the village. I would return to Mexico similarly laden, and sometimes paying a fine, if the customs officer unzipped my oversized suitcases full of new Gap clothes, Nike shoes and remote controlled cars. Once I brought back a chainsaw.



Image of a *paquete* (packet) from fieldwork notes

It is widely assumed in San Francisco that those who move freely across the fortified national border, which divides the community, will fulfill this role of delivery person or '*paquetero*'. Many local residents, particularly those with professional qualifications, have found it possible to get tourist visas, which allow them to cross the border legally, and they make a very good living, or supplement their salary, simply by moving objects from one place to the other. Although many formal courier companies now operate, these informal '*Paqueteros*', who often act as go-betweens between physically separated members of familiar families, are

preferred. They collect up packets in San Francisco and travel to New York, Connecticut, Houston or LA where they hand them out, charging the recipients \$5 per lb, and passing on the community's news and '*chisme*' (gossip) with the packets. Amongst the strong aromas of the edible morsels of San Francisco which move north and the shiny shoes and electronics which are lugged south come the most powerful packages of all – carefully wrapped photographs of recent significant events, and, crucially DVDs in their bright and optimistic covers, filmic *fiestas* wrapped up and ready to consume.



Image of event video from fieldwork notes

On one visit with Doña Lucia and Don José, Lucia disappeared from the room where we were eating and talking and we heard rustling from the basement below. After some time she emerged with a box and victoriously announced that she had found some things she wanted to show me. In the box were the clothes in which her children, who were seven and ten at the time, had crossed the Mexico-US border at her side, and four VHS tapes sent from Mexico, recorded at various *fiestas* of Don José's children. As Lucia unpacked the box she told me the story of her desert crossing with her children, fondling a faded yellow T-shirt as she explained the long and arduous journey they had endured as they walked first through the night and then through the heat of the desert sun. A woman, too weak to have made the journey, had died, leaving her baby son to be cared for by the rest of the group. The children had been hungry and thirsty and she had struggled to

keep going as she carried first one and then the other. The bringing out of the clothes seemed physically connected with the revelation of the story, a story usually packed away. When the story was over Lucia carefully folded the clothes back into the box and we watched the videos, one by one. The oldest tape, from the third birthday party of Don José's youngest daughter, was filmed in 1999, soon after he had come to the US.

The VHS had deteriorated and the image was distorted and fuzzy. The video opens with images of a tightly framed piece of paper, upon which are written '*Silvia Cuapio Cuapio*', the date, and later '*Mis Tres Años*' (my third birthday). A little girl wriggles around on a bed in her underwear and is shown being dressed in a glittery pink gown, covered in bows. She poses in the dress, smiling for the camera before beginning her videoed journey to the church. Despite the out-dated clunkiness of the VHS tape we were watching, the crackling of the image, the fuzzy sound and the dated graphics, I recognised Don José's house, which had changed drastically, and his children, who had grown up (Silvia was now 13).



Stills from *Silvia Cuapio Cuapio, Mis Tres Años*

Although I knew that this tape was much older than the following three, which we watched one after the other, they all seemed to belong to the same time and space. They all seemed to perform, for Don José and Doña Lucia, the same negotiations of lived experience, memory and imagination. Although I sensed that they evoked a coherent filmic place for the others watching with me, it was not a place I knew. Access to this filmic place, to an affinity with the migrants' experience of an imagined place evoked by the videos, was contingent upon a movement beyond the passive consumption of event videos, as a passing stranger, a tourist in a foreign place, to more active attempts to align my way of seeing, hearing and experiencing the video with theirs.

My current project, which combines video-based ethnographies of event video production in Mexico and their consumption by migrants in the USA with more reflexive strategies, is based on the hypothesis that engaging practically in the creation and consumption of event videos, and reflecting on that process through video editing, would constitute an ethnographic exploration of that filmic place analogous to classic visual anthropological explorations of lived places through observational film. Although my research was based on a shifting geographical focus from Mexico to the USA characteristic of the multi-sited ethnographic research described by George Marcus (1995), my interest in engaging with lived experience in these places was to move towards an understanding of the imagined place brought into being by the event videos moving between them. My research, then, follows “a set of relations across a social landscape that is both material and imaginary” (Marcus, 2008a:39).

*‘Foto Estudio Silver’*, one of many small businesses offering photography and videography services to San Francisco, is a single room with a shop frontage, directly behind the church, in the very centre of the village. The shop is divided by a counter, in front of which is a reception area. A potted cactus stands in the corner. On one wall hangs a large, enhanced colour image of San Francisco’s church in an embossed gold frame, the snow-capped Malinche volcano rising up spectacularly behind the ornate painted towers of the church. The opposite wall is home to a constantly regenerated host of photographs taken at local gatherings – religious processions, school events and civic ceremonies – which are purchased one by one by passing villagers, many of whom do not own cameras. Behind the desk, where Don Silvestre often stands leaning as he watches the world go by or chats with passing friends, there is a compact photo studio. Backdrops and reflectors stand poised, ready to make the black and white images needed for certificates and identification documents. In the corner is Don Silvestre’s video kit – the shoulder mounted VHS camera and the small bag of cables and spare batteries with which he recorded the video that I had watched with my mother.

The very same video lies on a different DVD, in a different coloured box, on a shelf in Yonkers New York. It belongs to a collection of videos whose viewing generates,

for the migrant brother of the erstwhile *quinceañera* (who is now nearly 21), an enduring and coherent imagined time and space constantly and indefinitely available despite the ravages of lived experience. Although *Foto Estudio Silver* and the living room in Yonkers – the locational points at which this filmic place come into contact with the places of lived experience – are important sites of participation for this project, it is the imagined place which the video brings into being – the San Francisco ‘Filmic Home’ that is the site of my ethnographic investigation. In contrast with other anthropological projects whose engagements with audiovisual media focus on either the production, the reception or semiotic readings of the content of such media, this project aims to use knowledge gathered through experiential video-based investigation of both production and reception to synthesise an evocation of the imagined places which these videos bring into being. This generative process of extrapolation is inevitably one of approximation: “the project’s site” to return to the words of George Marcus “is a social imagination that is conceptually invented and materialised in the practices of research or investigation based on a deeply reflexive motivation” (2008a:38).

At the centre of my hypothesis and philosophical framework, in the conceptualisation of the filmic space created by event videos, was the seed which rapidly began to sprout roots which cracked and grew out of the conceptual walls within which I had previously enclosed ‘ethnographic film’. Acknowledging the event video as generative of a filmic place, distinct from the lived place of the village, implied the possibility that other audiovisual media also generate such filmic places. Reflecting on my own previous experience of making *Tiempo de Vals* in San Francisco reinforced my sense that such filmic space was inevitably generated through audiovisual work. I came to think of the ‘realist’ aesthetic of observational film not as an indicator of the absence of such a space, but simply a particular deployment of it, which encouraged a particular type of cinematic ‘self-imagining’ in viewers. The critical reflection on the creation and consumption of audiovisual media as generative of filmic places and spaces is at the heart of this thesis – its conceptualisation of what ethnographic film is and the kind of knowledge it might yield. This conceptualisation draws on particular interpretations of the concepts ‘locality’, ‘place’, ‘space’, and ‘ethnographic film’

based on thinking both within and outside of anthropology. These interpretations are worth briefly setting out here.

### Locality, Place and Space

My understanding of place is rooted in phenomenological philosophy and denies the inherent existence of places as monolithic realities. Places come into being through the lived relationships between our bodies and minds and the material and sensorial environments in which we find ourselves. These more immutable physical environments can be thought of as localities. Tim Ingold's powerful image of our relationship with the world as one of creating trails is useful here (Ingold, 2009). As we move through the world our existence unfolds along paths, which can be thought of as strands or threads, as our individual trajectories meet and intertwine they form knots, rhizomatic nodes of 'place'. "A house", writes Ingold "is the place where the lines of its residents are tightly knotted together. But these lines are no more contained within the house than threads are contained within a knot" (Ingold, 2009:33). The house is the locality - the bricks and mortar which have a particular and specific geographical and temporal location - in which place of the home is created through the actions of its inhabitants. The dynamic processes of place-making through which we make sense of the world around us, and create our place in it can be described as emplacement, a concept on which I will elaborate further in Chapter 1.

The relationship between place and space is more thorny and the subject of much theoretical debate in the social sciences and philosophy. Ingold proposes that we do away with the concept of space as a redundant category "space is nothing, and because it is nothing it cannot truly be inhabited at all" (Ingold, 2009:29). Whilst I concur with Ingold in recognising space as a difficult category and one which, as Doreen Massey eloquently points out, has strong links to colonial power and the often unjust conquest of peoples and resources (2005:1), I find it a useful term, particularly in thinking through the way in which audio-visual assemblages become involved in processes of emplacement. In line with Massey's definition of space I understand it not as a continuous given surface - the territory of land or sea visible on a map - but as the "product of interrelations, as constituted through

interactions....[I] understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity as the sphere in which distinct trajectories exist” (Massey, 2005:9). Spaces, like places are continuously generated and regenerated. Space can be thought of as a ‘potentiality’ which remains relatively undefined until becoming engaged by subjective actors in processes of emplacement.

This vision of the relationship between the localities, places and spaces of lived experience can be usefully adopted in thinking through our relationship with audio-visual media and particularly the vernacular video on which this research is focused. A San Francisco migrant event video is created and consumed in particular localities (the village of San Francisco and the migrants living room in Queens for example) and in the context of the particular lived places, which those inhabiting those localities continually create and re-create through lived experience. As this video is consumed its viewers call on their own lived sensations as well as a personal constellation of memories and associations in making sense of the audio-visual assemblage before them. I conceptualise this experience of the video as one which brings into being a particular ‘filmic place’ associated with, but not the same as, the locality and the lived place in which the video was made, and that in which the viewer finds herself. These filmic places, like lived places are subjectively experienced and individually brought into being and understood. However since this experience and understanding is often based on memories and associations shared by individuals living in the same community their experience of the filmic assemblage is likely to be common at least to some extent. Like the knot of the lived home, individual experiences of the same audio-visual assemblage come to form a rhizome of shared experience. The relationship between this filmic-place and the filmic-space of that assemblage is similar to that described above in relation to lived spaces and places. The filmic space of a particular video is the latent potential of that assemblage to be experienced in multiple ways by different viewers. Like the spaces created by lived experience it is only brought into being through the processes of filmic emplacement through which viewers make sense of what they see and hear.

## Ethnographic Film

The term 'ethnographic film' is used widely and often uncritically across a broad swathe of writing but its most common and pertinent uses fall into two discourses. In the anthropological academy, ethnographic film is understood as an important extension of the thick description of written ethnography into audiovisual representations. Ethnographic film is, writes MacDougall, "different from indigenous or national film production in that it seeks to interpret one culture for another" (1998a:141). The way in which ethnographic film describes and interprets, and its conceived power to do so, is linked to the filmic devices of documentary realism, a broad suite of characteristics often categorised under the catch-all of 'observational filmmaking'. This tradition of filmmaking, which, as I will discuss later, has sometimes been mistakenly described as an absence of style (Henley, 2004:110, Grasseni, 2004b:15) has evolved from ideas developed around the UCLA ethnographic film training programme during the late 1960s (Henley, 2004:109).

The observational style of shooting and editing is based on long periods of contact between a filmmaker and her subjects in which she follows a subject's actions, recording them in their totality and editing them to maintain their spatiotemporal coherence (Henley, 2004:110). This complete recording of acts relies on extremely poised use of the camera and is technically very difficult to achieve. Even when it is accomplished, the editing of long continuous shots of action makes films extremely long and slow. In practice, the principles of observational film are inevitably watered down and visual anthropologists most commonly combine the continuity editing of action with talking heads and establishing shots to create audiovisual assemblages, which very much resemble realist documentaries made outside of the academy. These 'ethnographic films', often classified as such according to the academic training or intellectual intention of their maker, are shown at ethnographic film festivals alongside realist documentaries made by non-anthropologists, written about in journals of visual anthropology and watched on post-graduate courses in visual anthropology.

On the other side of this dichotomy, the term ‘ethnographic film’ has been appropriated to describe a very different type of audiovisual work. Catherine Russell, in her book *Experimental Ethnography* traces an “ethnographic cinema, freed from its social science origins and colonial and postcolonial forms of looking and documenting” (1999:xii). Russell looks at a wide range of experimental films made during the course of the twentieth century, analysing them in terms of the perspective they give us on human culture and society. Whilst her perspective is an interesting one, which I will draw on here, and many of the films she analyses offer an inspiring antidote to the banal realism of the observational film discourse, the applicability of her argument to visual anthropology is ultimately undermined by her nihilistically broad definition of ethnography. “Ethnography, in its most expansive sense” she writes “refers not to the representation of other cultures but to the discourse of culture in representation. Any and all films could thus be described as ethnographic insofar as they can be read as cultural texts” (p.xvii). This stance brings Russell dangerously near to aligning the ‘ethnographicness’ of an audiovisual document with its representation of ethnic otherness. Images which she describes as signifying ‘the ethnographic’ in Bruce Conner’s *A Movie*, for example, are images of ‘native people’.

Laura Marks in her 2000 book *The Skin of the Film*, casts her analytical net more precisely, reading ethnographic value into the work of transcultural artists and filmmakers whose formally experimental work expresses and materialises their culture in ways which connect with audiences outside of it. A conceptual ravine divides the work described by Marks and Russell as ethnographic from that shown at ethnographic film festivals and academic departments identifying themselves as promoting, teaching and studying ‘ethnographic films’. David MacDougall’s excellent 2006 book *The Corporeal Image*, which covers much of the same intellectual ground as Marks’ *The Skin of the Film*, contains no reference to Marks. The artists and filmmakers with whose work Russell and Marks engage would, I am sure, stop short of describing their work as ‘ethnographic film’.

Although hanging bridges across this valley have been built by recent intellectual and conceptual collaborations between artists and anthropologists (Schneider and Wright, 2006b, 2010, Marcus, 2008b), the most radical and productive

contributions to this movement have tended to involve the collaboration of artists and anthropologists (Marcus and Calzadilla, 2006) or anthropological reflections on the work of artists (Robinson, 2006, Walters, 2010). Although the language and methodologies of anthropology have been adopted in discourses surrounding contemporary art (Foster, 1996, Bourriaud, 2004 [2002]) there has not been significant conceptual diffusion in the other direction. The way in which anthropologists define the subjects and objects of study and the methodologies they deploy in their investigations have not been permeated by influences from fine art practice. There is, still, “little in the way of a reflective engagement with the anthropological assumptions built into the particular techniques and technologies used in visual anthropology” (Grimshaw, 2001:ix).

This project is based on a conceptualisation of ‘ethnographic film’ or more precisely ethnographic video-making as a tool, useful in understanding and conveying the being-in-the-world of other people, including other people’s relationships with the media they consume. It moves away from the tendency to represent or interpret one culture for another and, instead, explores the rich space of creativity made possible by those cultures’ own deployment and consumption of moving images. Drawing on Sarah Pink’s quotation of Karen O’Reilly, it conceptualises this ethnographic video making as a form of

“iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher’s own role and that views humans as part object/part subject” (2009:9).

I aim, here, to undertake such research, drawing on ideas and formal strategies embodied in the work described by Russell and Marks as well as those more conventionally assigned to the work of ‘ethnographic film’. My attempts to move beyond the evocation of lived place, to materialise the imagined, have led me outside of the practices commonly used by, and the films commonly recognised as,

‘visual anthropology’. Attempting to produce a richly constructed audiovisual account of imagined places and selves has led me to engage with formally experimental ways of working with audiovisual media. I have drawn on the interventionist practices of fine artists working with film and video and been inspired by the work of avant-garde filmmakers who use ‘found footage’ from disparate sources in creating richly textured audiovisual works. It is my hope that this broad-based approach will go some way towards materialising a reflexive engagement with the anthropological assumptions built into particular filmmaking techniques and open the possibilities for anthropological engagements with both lived and mediated experiences.

Perhaps the anthropological imperative to interpret one culture for another, producing representational texts, which deny the generative and transformative function of audiovisual constructions, can be linked to the anthropological reluctance to engage with vernacular deployments of audiovisual media. Despite a global explosion in the use of video over the last twenty years, an exponential proliferation of audiovisual material made and consumed as a part of everyday life in many parts of the world, there has been relatively little anthropological study of the videos made and consumed by non-anthropologists and outside of commercial circuits of production. In visual anthropology the discourse around grass-roots audiovisual production has been dominated by the ‘indigenous media’ discourse (the problems with which I will outline more thoroughly in Chapter 1), the voice of Richard Chalfen remaining peculiarly isolated (Chalfen, 1982, 1987, 2002). Within the growing sub-discipline of media anthropology (Askew and Wilk, 2002, Ginsburg et al., 2002b, Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005a) research has touched on the production of media in semi-commercial (Schein, 1998, 2002, 2004, Mankekar and Schein, 2004, Lewis and Hirano, 2000, Cunningham and Nguyen, 2003) as well as non-commercial circuits (Kolar-Panov, 1996, 1997, 2003, Steen Preis, 1997, Postill, 2006). These scattered studies have, however, deployed a variety of sometimes conflicting and unhelpful words to describe the media with which they engage, emphasising a need for the clarification of terms in this area.

It would be misleading to describe San Francisco event videos as ‘Indigenous Media’. The assignation of ‘home video’ in relation to these videos is also

problematic. The term 'home video' and the broader 'home mode' advocated by Richard Chalfen (1987:8) carries an ethnocentric implication of a video produced at a 'home' conceptualised within Euro-American society by members of a genetically enclosed nuclear family, an atmosphere which does not tally with the way in which the San Francisco event video is produced and functions. Whilst Faye Ginsburg's use of the term "small media practices" (2005:18) is less ethnocentric, its implication of a hierarchy of importance comparative to 'mass media' is undesirable.

I draw on the more extensive and well developed research of local photographic practices both by anthropologists (Pinney, 1997, Wright, 2004, Murdock and Pink, 2005) and non-anthropologists (Batchen, 2000) in adopting the word 'vernacular' in the study of audiovisual media. In line with these studies of 'vernacular photography' I conceptualise 'vernacular media' as an umbrella term, which might be used to describe home movies and home videos as well as the wide plethora of moving images which circulate in non-commercial or semi-commercial networks but which are made and consumed with the full involvement and responding to the needs of a given population. This terminology is useful in allowing a broad discussion of locally produced audiovisual media across different cultures whilst getting away from the eurocentric implications of terms that have been previously used to couch such perspectives. The implicit recognition of continuity between contemporary videographic practices and their photographic forebears rings true in San Francisco (and, I would speculate in other places in the world) where event videographers often began their careers and, like Don Silvestre, continue to function as studio photographers.

### Research Questions and Methodology

This project aims to answer two sets of interrelated research questions. Primarily the research aims to create an ethnography – with both an audiovisual and a written element – of the filmic places brought into being through the San Francisco event video. Seeking to understand how those videos work within the transnational community, the research sets out to explore and evoke the imagined selves and places made possible by event videos and the relationships between

these imagined places and selves and the lived experiences both of migrants in the USA and their families in Mexico. It also aims to pose and perhaps begin to answer a bigger question about the ways in which visual anthropology might engage with the imagined places and selves – and thus the filmic spaces – with which the creation and consumption of such vernacular media is bound up. Whilst the investigative and filmic techniques conventionally deployed in visual anthropology deal well with the representation and evocation of lived experience, they do not and cannot evoke and convey the imagined processes inherent in our interactions with moving image media. My thesis grows out of the idea that an anthropological engagement with vernacular media allows the opportunity to extend the principles of participant observation – learning by doing – into visual anthropology, a sub-discipline historically bound to learning by seeing.

The ‘kinaesthetic learning’ proposed by Michael Jackson in his seminal 1983 article *‘Knowledge of The Body’* is, essentially, at the heart of ethnography. Jackson’s call for us to learn through embodied experience rather than through observation, joining the dance rather than watching it and, experiencing it as well as asking questions about it, living it in order to know what questions to ask has been widely accepted. Using observational filmmaking as an ethnographic technique makes such participation completely impossible. The ethnographer/documentarist is tied to (and usually behind) the camera. She cannot dance. Whilst she might use the camera to capture images, which convey the corporeal sensations she imagines in those she observes, the camera sets her apart from them and inhibits her from experiencing sensations proximate to those of her interlocutors. The observational camera makes kinaesthetic learning impossible.

The anthropological investigation of video culture offers the opportunity for the application of audio-visual research methods based on kinaesthetic learning as imagined by Jackson. It enables us to live the creation and consumption of video in order to better understand how that video works. The observational filmmaker would approach a vernacular video culture by documenting it – recording the videographer at work, or the migrant family watching videos. She would use the camera to record discrete action, later editing this material into a sequence representing the process of video production and consumption. My approach here

attempts to move away from this observational approach replacing it with a direct and embodied involvement in the production and consumption of event videos.

I aim to understand the filmic place brought into being by San Francisco event videos through an embodied ethnographic knowledge of both video production and consumption, the project is essentially rooted in a video-based version of participant observation in which I use the audio-visual tools of video production (the camera and the editing program) not to represent the process of event video production and consumption but to become a part of it. I join the dance. This kinaesthetic approach to audio-visual investigation are reflected in the mainstays of the project - an apprenticeship with a videographer in Mexico and the extensive consumption of event videos with migrants in the USA. Whilst the video apprenticeship closely mirrors the learning by doing common to much contemporary ethnographic research my participation as a spectator of event videos is more ambiguous and complex. This attempt to get to share my interlocutors' experience of filmic emplacement, to come to know the places brought into being through their relationships with the audio-visual material before them, necessitates more oblique and interventionist methodologies. My use of video messaging and videographic reflection as methods of elicitation and evocation of the invisible and illusive experience of spectatorship, of the experience of a filmic place, are attempts to transpose the principles of kinaesthetic learning to the investigation of event video spectatorship. They are strategies through which I attempt to align my experience of the event video with that of my interlocutors. Like Jackson learning what it means to dance through his own experience of moving his body in relation to others around him, I attempt to learn what the event video means to those who create and consume it through strategies which enable me to become implicated and involved in those processes.

The thesis is divided into two parts, the video *900,000 Frames Between Us*, and this written component. The written thesis is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters outline the intellectual grounding and formal inspirations for the research: its roots in anthropology, film studies and avant-garde filmmaking. The remainder of the thesis addresses the way in which these influences play out in my own project, and presents the project's findings. In Chapter 1 I draw on work in

film studies and phenomenological philosophy to outline an approach to media spectatorship, which recognises it as generative of a filmic places and therefore a space distinct from the corporeal places and spaces of lived experience. The work of phenomenological anthropology and the developments in sensory ethnography which have allowed anthropologists to move away from the Geertzian perspective of 'culture as text' and towards an understanding of the corporeal spaces of lived experience have not extended to an analysis of mediated experiences.

Although visual anthropologists have begun to understand the usefulness of audiovisual media in exploring and evoking the corporeal experiences of others, I argue that insufficient consideration has been given to the particularly filmic spaces, which such media create. Written anthropological analyses of vernacular film and video have reflected this. By prioritising semiotic readings of image contents – considering such media as if they were texts – these studies have limited their ability to understand the particular way in which such film and video works to generate experience and meaning. I argue for a more phenomenologically grounded approach, referring to the work of film studies theorists such as James Moran (1996, 2002) and Patricia Zimmerman, (Zimmerman, 1995, Ishizuka and Zimmerman, 2008) whose writing acknowledges the fundamentally transformative nature of vernacular audiovisual media, and suggests ways in which visual anthropology might extend its perspectives to meaningfully engage with it.

In Chapter 2 I extend this application of the findings of film studies to the anthropological understanding of vernacular media by thinking through the work of three non-anthropologist filmmakers and its usefulness to anthropology. Michelle Citron, Su Friedrich and Richard Fung all incorporate home movies from their own childhoods in experimental found footage films. All of these works emphasise the transformative properties of the home movies they incorporate, underlining their essential role in creating alternative places of belonging for families whose lived experiences are riven with conflict and separation. By reading these found footage works *as* ethnographic films of filmic places, I think through their usefulness to visual anthropology not only in making explicit the role of vernacular media in creating filmic spaces, but in demonstrating a possible filmic

strategy for the exploration and evocation of the places created through the relationship between spectator and film.

Although inspired and encouraged by the autobiographical work of Citron, Friedrich and Fung, I recognise the distinct challenges faced by an ethnographer attempting to understand the relationship between the filmic and lived places in the lives of others. Chapter 3 describes the video-based ethnographic fieldwork through which I attempted to investigate this relationship. By extending the kinaesthetic learning that is characteristic of sensory ethnography into an active engagement in the creation and consumption of event videos and other kinds of video footage, I attempted to align my experience of the event video with that of my research participants. This process allowed insights into the relationship between the lived places and the filmic places of the transnational community, which would not have been accessible through other filmmaking strategies. This exploration of the filmic place of the event video developed in dynamic relationship with my evocation of that place through video editing. The creation of experimental video sequences, which materialised and expressed my understanding of the San Francisco filmic place, and the sharing of those sequences with members of the transnational community allowed a creative reflection on our respective experiences of that filmic place, which I was then able to feed back into my own research.

Chapter 4 offers a textual analysis of the filmic place of the San Francisco event video, as I have come to understand it, through the deployment of that video-based ethnographic research. Event videos, I propose, deploy fictionalising filmic strategies evocative of transnationally broadcast mass media, which ensure that migrants' experience of them is screen dependent. By discouraging migrants from reaching beyond the TV screen and into their always fragmented and sometimes traumatic lived experiences, event videos minimise their potentially disruptive impact on the lives of migrants. The filmic space of the event video and the place created as it is consumed allows the social relationships between migrant parents and their children, and the fictive kinship relationships vital to the social structure of the community, to be forged and maintained in circumstances that might, otherwise, make them impossible. In Chapter 5 I use a close reading of the video

*900,000 Frames Between Us* to outline the ways in which it deploys found footage filmmaking techniques, juxtaposing ontologically diverse images and sounds to make that filmic place accessible to viewers outside of the San Francisco community.

By using video to explore and evoke the filmic place brought into being through the production and consumption of event videos, this combined audiovisual and written ethnography makes a valuable contribution to the anthropological understanding of the San Francisco community. More broadly, the theoretical and methodological approaches of the study might suggest jumping off points for future attempts by visual anthropologists to understand and convey the mediated experiences of others. As well as the DVD of *900,000 Frames Between Us*, which can be found inside the front cover of the thesis, I have also included a two-DVD video appendix inside the back cover. These video appendices include a selected sample of videos from the video messaging project, to which I refer in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 and an example of a complete event video created by '*Foto Estudio Esffer*'. I have included these videos to provide further context for my research, and for the interest of researchers and students who might otherwise find it impossible to access the media to which I refer.

This project aims to contribute to an understanding of the way in which San Francisco event videos work and, more broadly, to the ways in which visual anthropology might engage with vernacular media practices and mediated experiences. Its findings might suggest ways in which the sub-disciplines of visual anthropology and media anthropology might productively contribute to one another. My research and its findings might also have interesting resonances with the work of anthropologists who focus on the social organisation and cultural practices of migrant and transnational communities. The work of anthropologists Robert Smith (Smith, 1998, 2006) and Roger Rouse (Rouse, 1991) in transnational communities straddling the Mexico-US border suggest interesting ways of thinking about and engaging ethnographically with transnational communities which there may be opportunities to explore in future research but which fall outside of the scope of this thesis. Equally, whilst I very much value and respect the huge quantity of regional ethnography pertaining to Tlaxcala, and

surrounding areas, written in both Spanish and English, my research has not prioritised a detailed engagement with that discourse which, again, falls beyond my scope here.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF FILMIC PLACES

### A Contextual Review

“What is opposed to fiction is not the real. It is not the truth which is always that of the masters and the colonisers; it is the story-telling function of the poor in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend”

Gilles Deleuze (2000 [1989]:145)

#### Introduction

The study of vernacular film and video would seem to provide an opportunity for anthropologists to investigate the ways in which moving images mediate our relationship with the world we live in. Anthropological studies engaging with vernacular moving image practices have, however, been limited by their tendency to conceptualise audiovisual media as if they were texts. In this chapter I will summarise the anthropological discourse surrounding audiovisual media made by non-anthropologists: the films and videos made as ‘indigenous media’, the transnational ‘video letters’ which have been studied by anthropologists and the ‘home movies’ and videos to which anthropology has paid surprisingly little attention. Research in all of those areas has tended to flatten those media, adopting a Geertzian analytical framework and ‘reading’ them as symbolic embodiments of the cultures in which they are produced. Recent developments in phenomenologically inflected anthropological research suggest an alternative conceptual framework.

Extending an understanding of the world as constituted by experience to an analysis of our relationship with audiovisual media implies the possibility that distinct imagined places are created when audiovisual media are made and

consumed. The creation and consumption of audiovisual media provide opportunities for the generation of imagined places, opportunities for self-imagining. Since such self-imagining transcends the corporeal spaces of lived experience it cannot be expressed or explored through the realist tropes of observational filmmaking. I conclude the chapter by making detailed reference to the work of filmmaker Rea Tajiri, whose found footage work *History and Memory* (1991) suggests an alternative strategy for the evocation and exploration of such filmic places and spaces.

### Reading Culture as Text – The Legacy of Geertz

Arndt Schneider has written of the anthropological tendency to “apprehend objects and actions of all kinds as if they were texts” (Schneider and Wright, 2006a:5), a tendency which grows alongside the visual anthropology’s wont to celebrate ‘thick description’ above all else (Hastrup, 1992). Both emerge from the Geertzian perception of ‘culture’ as “an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz, 2000 [1973]:452). Geertz’s understanding of the interpretation of culture as an act of transposition weighs heavy on the shoulders of a visual anthropology which, established on “little more than mutations in the principles of written ethnography” (MacDougall, 2006:267), and a “grafting of a visual technology onto existing anthropological practices” (p.264), still, after fifty years, often seems to feel it is struggling to catch up.

The criticism of anthropology as text-centric might be leveled as much at ethnographic filmmaking as at the analytical frameworks used to write about visual (or audiovisual) culture. If we, like David MacDougall, think of the essence of ethnographic film as the interpretation of one society for another (MacDougall, 1998a:96 ), we essentially condemn it to filmically read over shoulders. This has been the fate of much ethnographic film. A fate, I would argue, that is sealed by a dogmatic loyalty to the observational film style. Years of attempting to use audiovisual media to do Geertzian thick description, of “trying to make films act like texts” (Wright, 2010:71), has led to an implicit acceptance amongst many visual anthropologists that this work is best carried out by films and videos which

respect the continuity editing of documentary realism. The rhetoric of observational cinema has become so ingrained in the discourse of visual anthropology that observational film has sometimes been defined by the absence of an imposed structure or style. Paul Henley has written that “observational cinema, like most anthropological texts, is typically plain and unadorned stylistically” (2004:110). Observational film, he writes, is “a cinematography based on an ‘un-privileged’ single camera that offers the viewpoint, in a very literal sense, of a normal human participant in the events portrayed” (p.114). Christina Grasseni has echoed this, describing observational cinema as “re-creating everyday life experience through a shooting and editing style that gives the impression of rendering reality without analytical fragmentation” (2004b:15). Both Henley and Grasseni, in these analyses, align the observational film style with vision, denying the function of the audiovisual assemblage in creating a distinctly filmic experience. Lucien Taylor (1996) goes even further, acknowledging the potential for audiovisual assemblages to re-order our relationships with space and time but insisting that observational filmmaking is above or beyond such “mutilations” (p.76) of lived experience. Since observational cinema, he writes, “favors long takes, synchronous speech, and a tempo faithful to the rhythms of everyday life” it “honors the homogeneity of space by preserving the relationships between objects rather than substituting the abstract time and synthetic space of montage” (p.75-76).

I would argue that analytical imperatives inherited from an earlier generation of social anthropology, essentially a Geertzian perspective, structure the relationship of this kind of filmmaking and the filmic places it brings into being with the lived places it records. Its assemblage of shots from a highly privileged single camera in sequences organised on the logic of continuity editing are, like all other moving images, technologies of transformation as much as representation. Although the long takes and continuity editing of observational filmmaking are extremely valuable in creating filmic assemblages which give us a sense of the lived experiences of others (a point on which I will elaborate below), these conventions, historically aligned with realism are, nonetheless, constructions of abstract time and synthetic space through montage. To deny the role of the audiovisual assemblage in mediating our relationship with the pro-filmic is tantamount to a

disavowal of the filmic medium itself, a stance that drastically curtails the possibilities for filmmaking in visual anthropology. Despite the proliferation of phenomenologically inflected ethnographic practice since the 1980s (Jackson, 1983, Taussig, 1987, 1993) and moves toward more experimental approaches to the use of audiovisual media in visual anthropology (Schneider and Wright, 2006b, 2010, Pink, 2009), this deeply ingrained sense that there is a 'natural' way of audiovisually rendering reality, a perspective which severely restricts a critical analysis of the mediation of reality, has limited much filmmaking in visual anthropology to doing the representational work of an outmoded school of thought. This underlying tension (which is political and institutional as much as intellectual) may have contributed to visual anthropology's seeming reluctance to engage with the ways in which audiovisual media work to create more complex, ephemeral and intangible meanings which cannot be pinned down linguistically.

#### Indigenous Media as 'Cultural Texts'

Anthropological engagement with film and video made outside of the academy has been dominated by discussions of and around 'Indigenous Media'. First developed during the 1960s, when the availability of portable and relatively easy-to-use film equipment allowed visual anthropologists to hand cameras over to those they were accustomed to filming, Indigenous Media projects have been developed in conjunction with the work of anthropologists all over the world. Amongst the most important and abiding are the *Mekaron Opoi Djoï* project, begun by Terence Turner in Kayapo villages in Brazilian Amazonia (Turner, 1991, 1995, 2002, Carelli, 1988, Aufderheide, 1995) and projects in Aboriginal and First Nations Communities in Australia and Canada (Roth and Guthrie Valaskakis, 1989, Marks, 1994, Elder, 1995, Cache-Collective, 2008).

'Indigenous Media' has become a well-recognised sub-genre of ethnographic film, and is considered by many to be an important area of visual anthropology in which the erstwhile 'subjects' of research are given the opportunity, usually by anthropologists, to represent themselves. Whilst I recognise the value of such endeavors and of the resulting audiovisual productions, I would argue that the discourse surrounding them reinforces anthropological interest in texts, structures

and systems, cementing rather than undermining the positivist timbre of Geertzian analysis and allowing little space for a critical reflection on the way in which film and video actually work to negotiate identity.

In the 2008 edited volume *'Global Indigenous Media; Cultures, Poetics, Politics'*, Indigenous Media is broadly defined to include all “forms of media expression conceptualised, produced, and/or created by indigenous peoples across the globe” (Wilson and Stewart, 2008:2). This definition neatly encapsulates the most troubling aspects of the Indigenous Media discourse as it simultaneously assumes the existence of neatly bounded and homogenous ‘cultural’ groups (defined originally by anthropologists themselves as ‘indigenous’) and the use of media within these groups principally to express this cultural ‘authenticity’. Contributions to the edited volume work to reinforce this picture, describing examples of media which typically follow the conventions of documentary realism, made in the observational film style of ethnographic film and used to express cultural identity and ethnic authenticity often in the face of onslaughts from the incursions of global media and perceived cultural dilution (Smith, 2008, Salazar and Cordova, 2008, Halkin, 2008, Cache-Collective, 2008). Inevitably such approaches do not consider significant and widespread examples of “*media expression*” produced both within and outside of communities identifying or identified as indigenous.

This narrow approach to the relationship between identity and moving image is, perhaps, unsurprising given the deep entrenchment of the history of Indigenous Media in the development of ethnographic film as an extension and progression of Geertzian ‘thick description’. The Navajo Film Project, undertaken by Sol Worth and John Adair in 1967, was the first documented example of an anthropological project which offered film cameras and training to non-anthropologists and offered the resulting films as data for anthropological analysis (Worth and Adair, 1970, 1972). Spending a summer on a Navajo reservation, they taught the basics of 16mm filmmaking to a group of people who then made short films. The assumption was that there had been little exposure to Hollywood films in the chosen community and that by teaching only ‘the basic principles’ of shooting and editing the film-makers would be able to express something specifically Navajo in

their work (Worth and Adair, 1972). Worth and Adair set out to make what they referred to as a 'biodocumentary' (1972:26) that is, "a film made by a person who is not a professional film maker or someone who has never made a film before... a film made by a person to show how he feels about himself and his world" (p.26). The experiment's conceptual roots were closely allied to a Geertzian understanding of culture as text. Throughout his life Worth wrote about film through reference to linguistic models and in undertaking the project he very much wanted to establish new perspectives on the effect of linguistics on cognitive patterns: to determine to what extent the Navajo would demonstrate or develop a distinctive visual 'grammar'. Worth analysed the resulting films in terms of their representations of culture through a linguistic framework which he described as 'vidistics', using the 'edeme' and 'cademe' as analogies to the word and the sentence (Gross, 1981).

Whilst Sol and Worth aimed to allow the Navajo to express their own 'visual language' through film, there is no doubt that in this, as in other Indigenous Media projects, the anthropologists' own experiences of the relationship between culture and audiovisual production, particularly their experience of watching and making work in the observational tradition of ethnographic film, had an impact on the experiences of their students. Turner, (1992) in describing the early days of the Kayapo film project gives a very instructive detailed description:

"We have tried to limit editing assistance and advice to elementary technical procedures of insertion and assembly, compatibility of adjacent cuts, use of cutaways and inserts, and avoiding abrupt camera movements or zooms. We have made no attempt to teach Western notions or styles of framing, montage, fast cutting, flashback or other narrative or anti-narrative modes of sequencing" (p. 7).

This statement, almost comic in its own contradiction, reveals a lack of reflection on the basic tenets of observational film style – with its simulation of continuous time through specific techniques of shooting and editing – as specifically western notions of framing and montage. Later in the same article Turner comments that the Kayapo do not *yet* distinguish between what he describes as 'unedited home movies' and the 'beautifully edited work' made as part of the Kayapo Film

Workshop (1992:8), again betraying the implicit superiority of videos conforming to the aesthetic norms of observational film.

James Weiner, in his article *Televsualist Anthropology*, expressed his skepticism about the possibilities of film in the representation of culture. “We cannot,” he writes “consider the issue of indigenous filmmaking without simultaneously situating it alongside a critique of the filmic medium itself” (1997:201). Whilst I am more optimistic than Weiner about the possibilities for using audiovisual media to advance anthropological understanding, I concur with his call for a more critical analysis of the way in which moving images operate to mediate our relationship with the world around us. By creating and maintaining a hierarchy of value based on false notions of authenticity and by uncritically accepting a loosely defined ‘observational film style’ as a ‘natural language’ of cinema in which the film or video is assumed to be a duplicate of pro-filmic reality, the indigenous media discourse has, over more than 40 years, drawn anthropological attention away from a meaningful analysis of the way in which a broad variety of audiovisual productions work to mediate human relationships with the world around them. The Indigenous Media discourse as it stands has, in effect, passed the neo-Geertzian baton – ‘the cinematic representation of culture’ – from the hand of the anthropologist to the hand of the anthropologically constructed ‘native’.

### Media Anthropology

Growing out of the same roots in visual anthropology but more closely allied with Media Studies, the anthropology of media is a rapidly growing sub-discipline in which there has been a proliferation of research over the last ten years (Ginsburg et al., 2002a, Askew and Wilk, 2002, Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005a). This discourse lays the ground for the anthropological study of media suggesting that “media are cultural phenomena, worthy of study using the concepts and methods anthropologists have developed for the study of indigenous cultures” (Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005b:ix). These ethnographic engagements with media, which have been largely restricted to analyses of the mass media of broadcast technologies, have been somewhat restricted by their exclusively written form and the tendency to pursue the goals of Geertzian analysis. “Our work is

distinguished,” writes Faye Ginsburg “by an attempt to track, qualitatively and with the kind of cultural knowledge that enables what Geertz calls ‘thick description’, the practices, consciousness and distinctions that emerge for people out of their quotidian encounters with media” (Ginsburg, 2005:20).

These limitations notwithstanding, there have been important advances, both in and around media anthropology, in the ethnographic study of media consumption in diaspora and migrant populations, which has been largely focused on the impact of television in the lives of those far away from home (Gillespie, 1995, Cunningham and Nguyen, 2000, Lewis and Hirano, 2000, Sinclair and Cunningham, 2000, Sinclair et al., 2001, Wood and King, 2001, Mai, 2001, Tsagarousianou, 2001, Karim, 2003b, 2003a, Cunningham and Nguyen, 2003, De Santis, 2003, Aksoy and Robins, 2003, Madianou, 2005). Such studies emphasise the role of mass media as “vehicles of culture, as modes of imagining and imagining communities” (Ginsburg, 2005:18). The ethnographic study of diasporic media practices with a focus not only on the consumption of mass media but also substantial consideration of the production and consumption of vernacular media forms has remained underdeveloped. Stuart Cunningham and Tina Nguyen’s study of music videos produced for the Vietnamese diaspora in the USA (Cunningham and Nguyen, 2003) and the ‘video letter’ studies I will address below (Steen Preis, 1997, Kolar-Panov, 1996, 1997, 2003, Schein, 1998, 2002, 2004, Mankekar and Schein, 2004) are notable exceptions.

Advances in the development of the ‘Instant Communication Technologies’ which the Internet allows – the chat facilities of Facebook, Skype and so on – provide new opportunities for diasporic and migrant populations to communicate with their families. These spaces of communication provide new terrains for ethnographic exploration (Madianou, 2011, Miller and Madianou, Forthcoming). Such research offers important perspectives, which greatly enhance our anthropological understanding of diasporic and transnational communities. It is important to emphasise, however, that there is a real and sustained need for ethnographic research to develop our understanding of the video technologies, which continue to be the mainstay of transnational audiovisual communications in many migrant and diasporic communities.

## ‘Video Letters’ as Magic Carpets

A number of published studies in media anthropology over the last fifteen years address videos made as methods of communication between diasporic populations and their communities of origin. Dona Kolar-Panov’s research looks at the videos which are sent from communities in the former Yugoslavia to migrants from these countries living in Australia (Kolar-Panov, 1996, 1997, 2003). Ann-Belinda Steen Preis has written about the way in which Sri Lankan Tamil refugees use videos to maintain relations with those remaining in Sri Lanka (Steen Preis, 1997) and Louisa Schein has done work which analyses the way in which videos are used and consumed among exiled Hmong living in the USA (Schein, 1998, 2002, 2004). This research, all of which is presented in exclusively written form, focuses on the reception of audiovisual material ‘from home’ by diasporic populations. Whilst the image contents of the videos are briefly described, the details of their filmic structure – their shot styles and camera movements – and the circumstances of their creation are not emphasised. There is a strong tendency towards positivist and text-based analytical frameworks similar to those seen in the indigenous media discourse and characteristic of anthropology more broadly.

The assumption of videos as immutable objects of analysis, akin to texts, is common to all of these studies but is particularly emphasised in Kolar-Panov’s reference to the video traffic she describes in terms of ‘video letters’ (2003:114). This categorisation of the media in terms of a direct communicative function akin to that of writing letters returns us, once again, to the logic of language. Since this analytical framework is inadequate to explain or even describe the function of the videos, the analyses offered tend to resort to loose anecdotal descriptions and metaphor in describing and explaining their function. In place of a detailed analysis of the ways in which the viewers’ experiences of videos allow distinct and particular experiences of time and space, there is frequent reference to the power of video to literally overcome the confines of lived reality in physically transporting viewers across time and space.

Kolar-Panov describes the process of migrants living in Australia watching videos of family members remaining in Macedonia; “time and space lost their meaning

and those present were transported 12,000 kilometers into another culture, and often back in time. Families were reunited in an instant, if only just for a moment or two” (Kolar-Panov, 2003:114). Similarly Steen Preis describes the function of videotapes, which are sent from Sri Lanka to exiled Tamils, in terms of the possibilities they offer for magical transportation across space and time. “In a context of displacement and disconnection [the films] articulate the paradoxical possibility of ‘being there without being there’” (Steen Preis, 1997:88).

Videos are also frequently described in terms of their role in establishing relationships between diasporic populations and the territories of their physical homelands, a description which precludes a meaningful consideration of the way in which video operates. Schein describes the longing for homeland which is experienced by the Hmong population and the way in which travel to South East Asia and the resulting videotapes represent a search for “a sense of connectedness with the lives from which they were so abruptly severed” (2004:433). She emphasises the role of video in generating and perpetuating Hmong transnational identity and community, particularly emphasising the essential nature of the Hmong as “a group having lost their homeland” (2002:236) and the potential of videos to forge a connection with the physical territory of that homeland.

Steen Preis similarly connects the role of videos with physical places left behind. Tamil videos which contextualise family celebrations and rite of passage ceremonies with shots of the landscape are seen as playing an important role in the creation and maintenance of a coherent territorial homeland, particularly in the context of conflict:

“Faced with real and ongoing social fragmentation, sometimes aggravated by the factual disappearance or death of people in Sri Lankan civil war(s), these films insist upon the continuity, saliency, even reinforcement of certain places of belonging” (1997:92).

Kolar-Panov also emphasises the role of video in the Macedonian community in Australia as generating and maintaining relationships with a geographical place identified as home. She describes the significance of videos which, she argues,

familiarise children who have been born in Australia, with the culture of their parents, in terms of migrant communication with “the old country” (1997:73). These references to specific and coherent physical places, to the territories of ‘old countries’ as territorial ‘places of belonging’, are undermined by detailed descriptions of the videos themselves and in some cases by the language these scholars themselves use which reveals the extent to which videos generate uniquely filmic experiences of time and space, generating imagined as opposed to lived ‘places of belonging’. Kolar-Panov describes the strange, almost surreal, mixture of footage on videotapes made in Croatia and sent to Australia during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. She writes of the juxtaposition of off-air recordings of Croat broadcast TV with reports from the BBC and Sky News and footage specially shot in Croatia (1997:217). Schein describes the “Kaleidoscope of dancing, singing and costumes” (2008:200) of the Hmong videos watched in the USA, which contain romanticised images from a ‘homeland’ most Hmong have never known.

These more detailed descriptions of the videos suggest their importance not in overcoming the confines of space and time inherent in lived experience, or in magically transporting migrants to a perceived direct contact with the physical place of a lost territorial home, but in allowing for the creation of a conceptual place of belonging. Kolar-Panov describes videos of folk festivals which are watched by Macedonians in Australia in terms of their role in maintaining “collective popular memory” (2003:116) through which parents are able to convey a sense of their past and a connection to their homeland on to their children. The construction of this collective popular memory through diasporic video can be read as the creation of places of belonging quite distinct, although perhaps related to, the territorial places of ‘home’.

The tendency in these studies to treat videos as indexical representations of lived places is demonstrated and exacerbated by their prioritisation of the analysis of the content and consumption of event videos as opposed to their relationship with lived experience at the point of production. Barbara Wolbert’s research into the vernacular videographic practices of the Turkish community in Berlin, which includes both written and audiovisual ethnography, neatly demonstrates the limitations of this position and suggests the potential of research which might seek

to understand the relationship between the pro-filmic lived places of video recording, the video itself, and the viewers' experience of it. Wolbert dedicates a small section of an article in *Visual Anthropology Review* (2001) to a discussion of the video practices of the Turkish Community in Berlin. This article briefly describes the way in which videos are made and received in language, which emphasises the indexical relationship between video and party. During video screenings, she writes, "just like guests in the hall, everybody chats about the people on the dance floor. Everyone comments on dresses and hairdos and is curious about who sits in whose company" (p.31). In *Cihan's Video*, (Wolbert and Callenius, 1998), a short video about the role of moving images in the circumcision party of a young Turkish child, the limiting shorthand of Wolbert's written description is driven home with every frame.

*Cihan's Video* combines observational footage of the production and consumption of the Turkish event video with sections taken directly from that event video and interviews with various members of the family in which it is made. We follow the event video through its production, seeing the videographer at work in the circumcision party, and later its consumption as it is watched by family members in Germany and Turkey. This audiovisual ethnography emphasises the extent to which the event video constructs a particular version of Cihan's party and the extent to which the filmic experience of those viewing the video differs from the lived experience of the partygoers.

The entire party takes place in what is essentially a film set: Cihan's bed is placed at an angle, facilitating the video-making process and ensuring the camera the best view of the party's rituals. The stream of visitors who greet him do so under the watchful eye of the camera, which occasionally blocks their view. Most of the video is shot using a huge tripod mounted on wheels, which we see in action in the footage Wolbert has shot for *Cihan's Video*. This results in a very high camera angle and a shot, which floats through the air, looking down on partygoers from above as they dance and chat. The smooth movement of this aerial shot, as it moves around the party evokes the glamour of Hollywood and the romance of the dolly shot. Wolbert's video has a prosaic and descriptive structure. It does not set out to explore the transformative nature of the videographic practice it shows or to

evoke the imagined selves or places this practice might imply. It inevitably, however, depicts and demonstrates these qualities. In Wolbert's shots of the event video being watched the excitement of family members as they consume the filmic version of Cihan's party is tangible and is clearly particular to the mediated nature of this encounter. Comparing Wolbert's written analysis of this vernacular video culture with her audiovisual research suggests the potential of anthropological considerations of filmic places and the importance of audiovisual research methods in realising such investigation.

### Don't Home Movies all Look the Same?

Historically, vernacular movies and videos have received scant attention from anthropology. Where anthropologists have mentioned them, it has been in passing and often to negate or disparage their validity as cultural products of interest to anthropology. This attitude is clearly expressed in Terence Turner's disregard for the 'unedited home movies' which the Kayapo were so happy with. James Weiner calls the blanket rejection of 'mere home movies' into question and suggests their potential interest to anthropology (1997:202). Ginsburg responds stating the importance of understanding the employment of media in its cultural, sociological and political contexts be they "the unreflective leisure practices of the American middle class in the case of home movies or the very self-conscious struggle of indigenous people for recognition of land rights and cultural autonomy" (1997:215). This comment reveals a clearly mistaken assumption that home movie use is (or was in 1997) restricted to middle classes in the USA, and thinly conceals a belief in the inherent anthropological superiority of an 'Indigenous' tape which is somehow more authentic and culturally valuable than a 'mere' holiday reel.

The writings on the everyday photography, home movies and videos of the US middle classes by American anthropologist Richard Chalfen (1982, 1987, 2002) remain peculiarly isolated. As recently as 2002 Chalfen has reiterated the need for anthropologists to engage with the image-making practices of everyday life, calling for a visual anthropology of 'home media' (p.142 ) interested in investigating how "ordinary people use their home media to contribute evidence to their knowledge – arguably a database – of 'how they look'" (2002:141). Chalfen has consistently

argued for a consideration of home media as central to the negotiation of identity and particularly powerful in creating opportunities for the curation of self-image – “If Martians or Venusians should study our home movies long after we have ceased to exist, they would be studying a carefully contrived and biased view of everyday life” (1987:167).

Chalfen’s sometimes superficial observations on the nature of home media as crucial in negotiating identity in everyday life are not extended into any substantial analysis of how such a negotiation occurs. He follows the trend of Geertzian anthropology, considering snapshots, home movies and home videos as culturally structured artifacts which he essentially considers as texts (1987). The strong influence of Sol Worth in considering the pictorial forms of these media as an organised and structured way of looking at the world, a visual language, is acknowledged by Chalfen in his chapter *Home Movies as Cultural Documents* (1982). Here and in other writing he ‘reads’ and interprets that language from a perspective inflected by the analytical frameworks of Freudian psychoanalysis. He is very interested, for example, in the way in which a man might reinforce his sexuality by being photographed leaning up against the bonnet of a large car and of what might be interpreted about power relationships and family structure on the basis of who videos who doing what in a home movie or video (1987).

Chalfen’s approach, which raises some interesting questions, is limited both by the unfocused and unsystematic nature of his research; he analyses ‘home media’ of all types within specific families with little evidence of significant ethnographic fieldwork to engage with their practices of media production and consumption. In the context of visual anthropology it is, perhaps, his failure to extend his analysis to ethnic ‘others’ that is most significant. In his writings on the moving image he maintains a tight focus on the home media practices of white American middle class families. Perhaps these are the ‘unreflective leisure practices’ to which Ginsburg referred in 1997? Despite Chalfen’s early and persistent call for the extended study of home movies from ethnically diverse groups, (1987:162 ) this call has gone unheeded and the visual anthropology of home movie and other vernacular audiovisual media remains largely fallow ground.

## The Anthropology of Vernacular Photography

Perhaps because of their more explicit nature as tangible objects that can be held in the hand of the anthropologist and reproduced alongside text, the study of photographs as 'material culture' has led to perspectives, which recognise their phenomenological as well as their symbolic importance. Christopher Pinney's research (2004) emphasises the importance of photographs (and other printed images) in India, not only in terms of what they show but also in terms of what they do. The history of printed images in India, he argues, reveals the ethnocentrism inherent in an alignment of the mass production of images with the alienation of corporeal sensuality – the an-aesthetic effect which Susan Buck-Morss (1992) emphasises in her interpretation of the thinking of Walter Benjamin. In India, argues Pinney, mass-produced images have consistently played an important part in the mediation of corporeal sensuality, valued more for their 'corporeal' than for their 'aesthetic' qualities (p.23). Chris Wright (2004) has constructed a parallel argument in relation to the materiality of the photograph in the Solomon Islands. Wright's ethnography reveals the role of photography in this context not as an alienation of the body but as the latest manifestation of the capacity of objects to achieve and maintain the physical presence of deceased or departed people (p.78).

This attention to the phenomenological qualities of the photograph is foreshadowed in ethnographic work, both written and audiovisual, which emphasises the role of vernacular photography in transforming as well as showing that which it depicts. Pinney, in his 1997 ethnographic study of vernacular photography in Nagda, India, has emphasised the critical importance of the performative nature of photography and its status as 'dream production' (p.128). Photography in India, he explains, is not exclusively associated with indexicality. Instead the photos made at photo studios are considered as creative opportunities through which individuals can construct the present and the past, creating alternate versions of themselves (p.194). Portrait images are made before elaborate backdrops depicting spectacular buildings and scenes and costumes are often used. "The photographic studio," writes Pinney "becomes a place not for solemnisation of the social but for the individual exploration of that which does

not yet exist in the social world” (p178). This sense of the transformative power of vernacular photography in India is documented in David and Judith MacDougall’s film *Photo Wallahs* (1991), which follows several street photographers in a North Indian hill station. The film shows the mimetic power of photographs and the appeal of the transformations such images allow as customers are imaged in costumes inspired by history and the stars of Hindi cinema.

More recently, Liam Buckley (2006) has similarly emphasised the transformative function of photographic practice in his study of Gambian studio photography. Buckley traces the relationship between studio portraiture, in which individuals are depicted in the lavish reconstructions of the domestic ‘parlour’ and state building from the early days of Gambian independence in the 1960s. The sense of elegance and modernity that the studio portrait allowed the sitter, argues Buckley, was crucial in encouraging a sense of national belonging and civic participation (p.63). The role of vernacular photography in creating both modernised subjects and places in which they can belong recurs in ethnographies from elsewhere. Eriberto Lozada (2006) has written of the function of photography in rural China where he experienced the use of the camera by his research participants who made images of themselves with markers of modern technology such as television sets creating “specific site[s] of the localisation of globalisation” (p.97).

Bonnie Adrian in her ethnography of bridal photography in Taiwan (2003) similarly emphasises the importance of the photograph in projecting and materialising social fantasies of modernisation. Bridal photographs are used to imitate the aesthetics of global capitalism, mimicking the poses and backdrops of global advertising (p.12) and inserting images in mock ups of magazine layouts (p.69) in assemblages that ‘reframe’ the couple as upwardly mobile and cosmopolitan. Deidre McKay (2008) has described the use of vernacular photography in a transnational context as important in such ‘reframing’, describing the use of photography as key in the creation of “desired future selves” (p.381). McKay describes the traffic of photographs between Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong and their families. Migrants, she argues, use photographs sent home – in which they are depicted surrounded by the trappings of wealth and success – to maintain a presence in the village (p.385) as ‘big people’ of status and

importance (p.390). McKay describes the careful incorporation of such images in the material life of the village – the careful construction of a photographic collage on the back of a door for example – through which those staying at home materialise their own imaginations of possible futures (p.389).

All of these studies are essentially based on the observation of photographic practices and of treatment of photographs as material objects, augmented by semiotic analyses of the images themselves. Whilst McKay (2008), Pinney (1997, 2004) and Wright (2004) were all involved in creating beautiful and instructive photographic images which they publish along side their written analyses these participations are not at the heart of their methodological approaches. Both McKay and Pinney describe learning from their participation as photographers. Pinney recounts learning from his ‘mistakes’ in taking a photograph of a neighbour in India, beautiful by his aesthetic standards but lacking in the eyes of it’s subject, who complained of the shadow across his face and the photograph’s failure to show his whole body (1997:8-9). McKay writes about, and shows us, photographs she has taken of Philipino migrants in Hong Kong. In each case, however, photographic participations remain anecdotal and peripheral to research, which is focused on the interpretation of images and is essentially text based.

The research of Donna Schwartz (1993) who has embraced such participant observation photography might point the way to a more coherent methodology for the creation of visual ethnographies which enhance our understanding of vernacular photographic practices. Schwartz describes the particular advantages of learning to ‘be’ a press photographer in order to better understand the way in which such photography manipulates meaning to construct a particular version of a given event (p.24).

### The Promise of Phenomenology

Such attempts to understand the way in which media work to construct or reconstruct the relationship between the people who make and consume them and the world they live in is largely absent from anthropological considerations of vernacular moving images. Arjun Appadurai has described the profound effect of the proliferation of media in modern life: “electronic media” he argues “provide

resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project” (1996:4). Whilst this self-imagining is conceived by Appadurai as primarily a function of consuming the products of mass media, his assertion clearly has implications for the way anthropology might think through the part vernacular media have to play in the relationship between human beings and the world they live in. Crucially, Appadurai suggests both that our interactions with media (and particularly with moving images) allow us to imagine ourselves and thus experience ourselves-as-other and that this experience of self-as-other is socio-culturally significant, and should be taken into account by social scientists.

If we think through vernacular audiovisual media from this perspective, as “resources for experiments in self-making” (Appadurai, 1996:4), we must rethink the positivist Indigenous Media discourse and look again at both the videos made under this category and the transnational videos analysed by Kolar-Panov, Schein and Steen Preis. Looking at this media with Appadurai in mind, we might see them as building blocks of the ‘imagined worlds’ which he hypothesises as so important, particularly amongst de-territorialised and otherwise marginalised communities (1996). The anthropological investigation of the way in which vernacular media work to create spaces for self-imagining and to make imagined worlds possible has an obvious precursor in the ‘phenomenologically inflected work’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009:30) which has proliferated in recent years both in anthropology and in neighboring disciplines.

Since the mid 1980s, there has been an increasingly intense critique of the overly intellectualist bent of anthropology and the tendency to assimilate bodily experience to conceptual and particularly linguistic formations. Much of this work draws on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly ideas from his 1945 ‘Phenomenologie de la Perception’ published in 1962 as ‘Phenomenology of Perception’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]). Michael Jackson’s seminal ‘Knowledge of the Body’ called for a “move away from the unduly abstract semiotic models that have dominated anthropological research in recent years” (1983:327 ) and used phenomenological philosophy to suggest an alternative conceptual grounding for the understanding of human experience. Jackson proposed that anthropologists take into account the interdependence of knowledge and embodied experience,

recognising the importance of what Merleau-Ponty described as the 'lived body' in structuring human experience. 'Culture', argues Jackson, is the practical activity, which constitutes our relationship with the world around us (p.327).

Since Jackson's article, and particularly in the last ten years, a significant body of ethnographic research and anthropological writing has been developed in which ethnographers have sought to understand 'culture' in this way, centralising their own embodied experiences as ways of knowing (Stoller, 1989, 1997). Subsequent to such research, the discourse around 'Sensory Ethnography' has suggested the ways in which approaching ethnography through lived bodies offers us both new ways of knowing, new types of knowledge, and new avenues of potential research (Howes, 2003, Pink, 2009). Amongst the most important paradigm shifts resulting from this discourse has been the development of an understanding of place as created through the experience of the lived body, and as prior to space and time. Alberto Corsin Jiménez has built on the work of philosopher Edward Casey, (1996) in proposing that:

"The world is not a known place that exists prior to our engagement with it, on the contrary, the world happens with us and, in choosing what world we want to live in through our engagement with the world, we become the spaces to which we have invested our practices" (Corsin-Jimenez, 2003:140).

The places we know are not monolithic 'realities', they come into being through the lived relationships between our bodies and minds and the material and sensorial environments in which we find ourselves (Pink, 2009). The primary role of the anthropologist as ethnographer is not to know from a distance, to analyse or translate, but to choose and create places proximate to those chosen and created by those we seek to understand. Sarah Pink has described this 'getting to know' as a process of emplacement, arguing that the key to sensory ethnography is "to seek to know places in other people's worlds that are similar to the places and knowing of those others" in order to "come closer to understanding how those other people experience, remember and imagine" (2009:23).

## Audiovisual Research and ‘Knowledge of Being’

Anthropologists working with audiovisual media have increasingly come to recognise the potential of audiovisual research, and particularly of filmmaking, to contribute to our knowledge of lived bodies. David MacDougall has been at the forefront of this movement, consciously attempting to make audiovisual work which moves towards a ‘knowledge of being’ (2006:06), and positioning that work in the context of phenomenological scholarship through his writing. MacDougall is preoccupied, particularly in his most recent writing, with the need to move anthropology and particularly visual anthropology, on from the Geertzian framework of analysis towards other types of knowledge and ways of knowing. “The only substantive challenge to anthropological thought” he writes “comes not simply from visual anthropology broadening its purview but from its entering into communicative systems different from ‘the anthropology of words’” (p.219).

MacDougal grounds his movement away from the anthropology of words in readings of both Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty he posits both the act of filmmaking and the act of film viewing as embodied processes of being in the world: “Filmmaking requires interactions of the body with the world in registering the qualities of texture and shape, which do not exist independently of such encounters. The world is not apart from, but around and within the filmmaker and the viewer” (MacDougall quoted in Pink, 2009:100). Films, argues MacDougall, are capable of creating ‘resonances’ between bodies, which facilitate the development of prelinguistic, embodied relationships between viewed and viewer, that is between the film’s subject and its audience (1998b:53).

MacDougall has extended his analysis of the way in which films create direct relationships between bodies through his engagement with the ‘cinematic philosophy’ of Gilles Deleuze, largely ideas taken from his book ‘Cinema II’ , published as *L’Image – Temps* in 1985 and in translation in 1989. Deleuze’s conceptualisation of the power of cinema as prelinguistic experience holds, argues MacDougall, particular promise for visual anthropology – a discipline stuck in a Geertzian rut of textual analysis. The best films, argues MacDougall, are what Deleuze describes as “non-language material, a material not formed linguistically

even though it is not amorphous and is formed semiotically, aesthetically and pragmatically” (cited in MacDougall, 2006:259). Such films use images and sounds to bypass communication through the utterances of language, directly communicating in MacDougall’s words “the moment at which those meanings emerge from experience, before they become separated from physical encounters, where thought is still undifferentiated and bound up with matter and feeling” (2006:1).

By accessing this moment, where thought, matter and feeling are bound together, audiovisual research allows us, argues MacDougall, to move beyond language and to “re-enter the corporeal spaces of our own and others’ lives” (MacDougall, 2006:270). MacDougall’s interest in using film as a way to investigate the sensory spaces of human lives, and to make the phenomenological realities of his subjects available, and palpable, to his audience, is long standing and many of his films and videos seem to both embody and give weight to this philosophical stance. In a particularly memorable scene from his 1997 film *Tempus de Baristas*, which follows three generations of shepherds in a rapidly urbanising Sardinia, we experience the making of goat’s cheese. The scene wordlessly progresses through the stirring of the curds over a fire, the stiffening movement of the large stick palpable to us, to the cool dripping of liquid as the practiced hand of the shepherd presses shiny white curds into a riveted plastic mould. The vivid images and sounds, presented in deft montage, ensure that we not only see or hear *about* the making of cheese but that we experience it, through our whole bodies, and as prelinguistic experience.

#### Video in the Investigation of Corporeal Spaces

The extension of a phenomenological approach to anthropology through the integration of audiovisual methods and outputs into both ethnographic fieldwork and publication has gained currency in recent years. Sarah Pink has suggested that filmic practice might be deployed as a tool, which assists us in knowing the world as our subjects do, facilitating the process of “aligning our bodies, rhythms, tastes, ways of seeing and more with theirs” so that “we begin to become involved in making places that are similar to theirs and thus feel that we are similarly

emplaced” (2009:40). Such use of filmmaking as phenomenological anthropology is demonstrated in recent work by Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, on which they reflect in a 2009 contribution to the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. In this article Grimshaw and Ravetz describe projects in which each of them has engaged observational filmmaking, using it as a vehicle for the aligning of their experience of the world with that of their subjects. Ravetz describes her use of video in researching the life of Pennine Hill Farmers in ‘The Bracewells’ (p.547). Explicitly setting out to examine the dominance of vision in western culture, and to assess the role of other senses in the being-in-the-world of farmers, Ravetz found that the farm was a place constituted by all of the senses, “ a site where different knowledge modes met – in friction” (p.548). Her use of the video camera as her principal tool in exploring the farm, and her later editing of a video work, allowed her to understand and express her emplacement in relation to it. These deployments of audiovisual media were, she argues, central to her phenomenological ethnography, vital in her understanding of the farmers’ being-in-the-world and central to her communication of that understanding to others.

Christina Grasseni also made heavy use of video in her investigation of North Italian Cattle Breeding (2004a, 2004b, 2009). Grasseni has, in this research, used the video camera to investigate the relationship between cattle breeders and their stock. Understanding the breeders’ way of seeing cows as an embodied, skilled sense (2004a:41), “not simply a semiotic code” but “a perceptive hue that once acquired cannot be bracketed off or exchanged for another” (2004a:45), Grasseni aims to understand the breeders’ embodied relationship with their cows and the wider world around them through her embodied understanding of this skilled vision. Grasseni describes her use of the camera as a catalyst of attention and a way of reflexively refining her vision. Beginning her fieldwork with an untrained eye, and no idea of how to film (or see) a cow, she describes the process of learning. As her cattle breeder interlocutors instructed her as to what were, for them, the important visible characteristics of a well-bred cow and she began to frame these characteristics, her way of filming and thus her way of seeing became more structured (2004b:20). Grasseni describes this process of learning to film the cows as one of alignment in which her vision and thus her sense of ‘emplacement’ came to approximate that of her cattle breeder subjects (2004a:53).

## Video and the Transcendence of Corporeal Space

The conceptualisation and use of audiovisual methods as tools to investigate, evoke and make palpable the corporeally sensed places and experiences that comprise the sense of being in the world of 'others' marks an important move away from the Geertzian models and language-centric practices which have tended to dominate in anthropological discourse. It can be argued, however, that there has, so far, been inadequate anthropological consideration of the way in which moving images work to create opportunities for emplacement that augment and transcend the corporeal places of lived experience: the ways in which our experiences of audiovisual media disrupt and augment the space and time of the lived body.

Interested in the ways in which our interactions with cinema differ from our perceptions of everyday life, Deleuze, in his *Cinema I – The Movement Image* (Deleuze, 2005 [1983]) and *Cinema II – The Time Image* (Deleuze, 2000 [1989]), thinks through our experience of different conjunctions of moving images and sounds. The movement image, where continuity editing follows characters as they move through time and space, gives viewers, argues Deleuze, a sense of the 'sensory-motor situations' of the characters on screen through which we perceive the continuous flow of space and time (Deleuze, 2005 [1983]:20). The formal experimentation begun in European art cinema of the 1950s and 60s, he argues, succeeded in breaking away from this dependence on the movement of protagonists to show time (2000[1989]).

Deleuze describes the films of Godard, Resnais, Ozu and others, as leading to a deeper kind of perception: "When images are not linked together 'naturally', when they relate to a systematic use of false continuity, a turning round and grasping them requires a considerable effort of memory or imagination, in other words, a reading" (2000 [1989]:235). This 'reading' is envisaged by Deleuze not to be the work of the analytical mind but a deep interaction of bodily memory where actual and virtual images enter into complex relations to constitute meaning: "When we cannot remember, sensory-motor extension remains suspended and the actual image, the present optical perception, does not link up with either a motor image

or a recollection image which would re-establish contact. It rather enters into relations with genuinely virtual elements, feeling of déjà vu or past ‘in general’, dream images” (p. 52). This scouring of the mind, the calling on virtual elements to make sense of an image is, according to Deleuze, the precursor to a direct experience of time through cinema.

Laura Marks has unpacked the implications of Deleuze’s cinema theory in ways very pertinent both to the creation of images within anthropology and to the anthropological analysis of human engagements with moving images, particularly those of vernacular media. In *The Skin of The Film* (2000), Marks looks at a broad selection of films and videos made by filmmakers working and communicating between cultures, tracing the way in which these works deploy particular formal and stylistic attributes which facilitate the active viewing described by Deleuze in *Cinema II*. These works, Marks argues, enter into direct relationships with our bodies, appealing to our ‘embodied knowledge’ (p.129). Suspending the sensory-motor response through their use of jumbled narratives, unexpected juxtapositions and hard to read images, these films force the viewer into her own memory, and her own body, in order to make sense of them. By connecting with our own sense memories these films are literally felt in synaesthetic ways which particularly engage our senses of smell and touch (p.223 ).

“Cinema,” writes Marks “is a mimetic medium, capable of drawing us into sensory participation with its world even more than is written language. Images are fetishes, which the reader can translate – more or less depending on how her own experience is embodied into sensuous experience” (2000:214). This physical perception of, and involvement with, a film or video can be described as cine-mimesis. Whilst Marks emphasises the importance of the ‘time image’ in creating such sensory participation, and a strong distinction between time image and movement image runs through her argument, I would argue for a broader recognition of the mimetic powers of the moving image. All moving images, to varying extents, draw us into relationships of sensory participation. This sensory participation is not, however, directly with the corporeal places of those represented on the screen, of the ‘others’ with whom we are connected by the film. Our sensory participation is precisely with the world of the film itself, a world with

which we enter into an intersubjective relationship. In Marks' terms this is a cinematic encounter "not only between my body and the film's body, but my sensorium and the films' sensorium" (p.153). By engaging our own memories in cinema viewing, we participate in creating the film on screen (p.47). Although most viewers in urban Euro-America have never made cheese, we relate our own experiences of stirring, of wetness, of squeezing and smoothness, of heat and cold, to our filmic interaction with MacDougall's sequence of the Sardinian shepherd. Importantly, our cine-mimetic relationship is not with the shepherd but with the film itself.

Vivian Sobchack, who also draws heavily on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty in her analysis of film spectatorship, has described this relationship between film and viewer as the "dialogical and dialectical engagement of two viewing objects who also exist as subjects" (1995:52). This experience of engagement, two beings constituting one another, can be read as analogous to our emplacement in space and time through lived experience, to the world happening 'with us' described by phenomenologically inflected ethnography. Just as the places of lived experience come into being through the lived relationships between our bodies and minds and the material world that surrounds us, so our relationship with the images and sounds of filmic sequences and the sense memories that they trigger, generate a sense of emplacement.

In this sense we can describe our interaction with audiovisual media as generative of senses of filmic emplacement, and of imagined places that we know only through our relationship with those images and sounds. As we experience our own memories, of feeling for the moment of thickening as we stir a pan of custard, or of wringing out a wet dishcloth, in relation to the film of the shepherd making cheese we mentally create a third place, a place in which we experience ourselves-as-other in relation to our experience of the shepherd, his fire and the cheese. Just as lived places 'happen with us' through emplacement based on our embodied engagements with the world, the filmic places of a moving image assemblage 'happen' through our cine-mimetic engagement with it, our emplacement in relation to it, as we use our memories to piece together an imagined place. Just as our relationships with the world constitute us as we "become the spaces in which

we have invested our practices” (Corsin Jiménez, 2003:140) so this cine-mimetic relationship with moving images reconstitutes our experience with the world as we experience our memories in new constellations which facilitate the experience of imagined selves, an experience of self-as-other.

Gilles Deleuze in his characteristically enigmatic style makes this clear when he writes that

“cinema does not give us the presence of the body and cannot give us it”. Instead, he argues, “it spreads an ‘experimental night’ or a white space over us; it works with ‘dancing seeds’ and ‘luminous dust’, it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception. What it produces in this way is the genesis of an ‘unknown body’ which we have in the back of our heads, like the unthought in thought, the birth of the visible, which is hidden from view” (2000 [1989]:194).

The ‘experimental night’ or white space which cinema opens up, or allows, is made deeper, or whiter, by the possibility that the memories we call on in making sense of a cinematic scene (the shepherd stirring the milky pot above the flickering flames of a wood fire) might be memories of other media we have seen, other filmic places in which we have found ourselves (when watching Delia Smith or Jamie Oliver on television, for example) and, therefore, of imagined rather than lived selves.

This transformative capacity of audiovisual media, our interactions with which allow us to experience ourselves-as-other, are reflected in the everyday uses of film and video of vernacular media. In her study of the cattle breeders of Northern Italy, Christina Grasseni discovered a thriving vernacular video culture surrounding the breeding and showing of cows. She describes videos made at cattle fairs either by cattle breeders themselves or commissioned to local photographers as ubiquitous objects in the cattle breeder’s home (2004b:22). These videos depict cows, usually starting from a view of the whole cow from above before zooming in to isolate various parts of the cow, the haunches from the side to

show the curvature of the spine or the udders from below (p.23). Grasseni's analysis of these videos is that they show the view of the breed inspector, that they are analogous with his way of looking (p.24). Whilst the videos certainly do contain, as Grasseni puts it "clues about the way in which they look at cattle, as well as what they think cattle should look like in order to be worth filming" (p.23) they might also tell us a lot about the filmic imagination of the people who make and consume them.

This use of the video camera to frame the cow might be as much about creating the possibility of a new relationship between breeder and cow, a new sense of emplacement for the viewer, as it is about extending the relationship between breeder and cow as it already exists in lived experience. This filmic relationship, which is inevitably transformative, offers the possibility of transcendence as the cow is refigured through the framing and movements of the camera. Grasseni's analysis does not take into account the possibility that the vital function of the videos might be one of transformation – one of creating an alternative, filmic cow. Interpreting the video footage as analogous with vision denies the possibility that the form of such a filmic cow might be influenced not only by the breeders' lived experience and skilled knowledge of what constitutes a perfect cow but also by their experiences of emplacement in relation to cinematic evocations of power, beauty and virtue. The breeders use of the video camera to frame the cow is, I would argue, generative of a reconstructed cow that might embody, for example, an amalgamation of the ideal qualities of a well-bred beast (as they are understood through the breeders' lived experience) with an attempt to evoke, through the moving images of the animal, the cinematic splendor of Clint Eastwood as a western cowboy.

#### Home Videos and Home Movies as Tools for Self-Imagining

In Film Studies, a discourse has developed around home movies and videos, which implicitly recognises their power as inherently transformative and generative of particular and distinctly cinematic places. James Moran, in his 2002 book *There's No Place like Home Video*, conceptualises the role of home video in the construction of a 'photographic home'. Moran's vision of the photographic home extends his theorisation of home itself as a "phenomenological reality produced as

the result of productive and reproductive work by its members to forge identity and maintain security” (p.61). Home video, he argues, not only serves as a vehicle for transmitting messages, it is also internalised and thought through (p.26), providing an important space for the generation of identity and security. By allowing us to see ourselves as ourselves but also allowing us to see ourselves-as-others, repetitive and homogeneous ‘rite of passage’ home videos function to “conventionalise unique autobiographies as an allegory of ‘the life cycle’, as an iteration of common human experience” (p.62).

This conceptualisation of vernacular media as generative of imagined places is also implicit in Patricia Zimmerman’s 1995 book *Reel Families*. Zimmerman theorises the relationship between the movie camera and the idealisation of the nuclear family, charting the cinematic materialisation of increasingly repetitive family scenes as home movie cameras became more readily available through the twentieth century. “Home movies,” she writes, “preserved and evoked a residual social formation of families as important cultural and social agents through idealising, indeed worshiping, its cloistered interactions” (p.133). Her contribution to the 2008 edited volume *Mining the Home Movie* (Ishizuka and Zimmerman, 2008) goes even further. “Amateur film,” she writes, “contains the history of self-representation, an auto-ethnography. The amateur camera mediates between self and fantasy” (p.276).

*Mining the Home Movie* (Zimmerman, 2008a) traces the creation and consumption of home movie in various cultural and historical contexts, with a particular focus on amateur film archives and work by contemporary artists and filmmakers who engage conceptually and practically with home movies. The publication emphasises the way in which home movies embody the types of private and collective histories which are often suppressed in the hegemonic discourse, materialising perspectives which are often excluded from the formal archive, the constructions of the past recognised as ‘history’ (Zimmerman, 2008b). Several chapters are dedicated to the home movie footage taken by Japanese American evacuees imprisoned in confinement camps on US soil in the latter part of the Second World War. Between 1941 and the end of the war, over 120,000 men, women and children, two thirds of whom were American citizens by birth, were

incarcerated in makeshift camps in states all over the USA. Although most of the camps did not allow inmates to possess cameras, this rule was flaunted or relaxed in several cases, resulting in a rich 16mm home movie archive of life in the camps (Ishizuka and Nakamura, 2008).

Robert A Nakamura and Karen Ishizuka's 1994 film *Something Strong Within* (1994) draws on this archive, cutting together footage made by home moviemakers in various camps with text from interviews with internees (Ishizuka and Nakamura, 2008). The film includes footage made by Dave Tatsuno, a prisoner at Topaz camp in Utah, who recorded the everyday life of his family and friends. Written material contextualising his reels is published alongside a 'visual essay' taken from Nakamura and Ishizuka's film (Ishizuka, 2008). These grainy images, and the discourse that surrounds them – both audiovisual in the work of Nakamura and Ishizuka, and written in the chapters published in *Mining the Home Movie* (Ishizuka and Nakamura, 2008, Ishizuka, 2008, Rosen, 2008) – emphasise their role in creating an alternate place of belonging for the interned communities.

In her review of *Something Strong Within*, Joy Yamauchi notes the absence of visible evidence of incarceration. Barbed wire gates, armed sentries and the better facilities of Caucasian personnel remain off-screen and invisible. There is, she writes, no misery (Ishizuka and Nakamura, 2008:99). The tendency to use the home movie camera to record happy times is unsurprising and, as Rosen points out, footage of graduations, holiday celebrations, parades, community events, and smiling families and friends dominate (Rosen, 2008:114). The sense that the camp as a lived place was transformed by the presence of the camera is also, perhaps, unsurprising. The scenes of those in front of the camera smiling and laughing are so clichéd as to almost pass us by as insignificant. As David Tatsuno comments: "Most of the shots look peaceful, and almost happy because whenever I took shots of evacuees, they would 'ham it up' and smile" (Ishizuka, 2008:130). This 'hamming it up' for the camera can, however, be read as a more profoundly transformative and even subversive act, a collective complicity to use the movie camera to create an alternative place of belonging.

Most of the home movie footage taken in the camps broadly follows the cinematic conventions of big budget Hollywood movie making, transposed into handheld 16mm. Wide, medium and close-up shots are steady and symmetrically composed. The camera smoothly pans from foreground action to contextualising landscape, and tilts from sky and rooftops to action below. Scenes often seem to be set up for cinematic effect – a girl pops her head out from behind a frying pan, another skates on a frozen pond, her red sweater glowing against the steely grey landscape. Even the shots of the harsh weather in the camps, the struggle to keep going through driving snow and dejected exhaustion, are rendered cinematically. This cinematicisation of life, the use of the movie camera and stock to reposition those in front of them, to create a better place of belonging outside of or above the barbed wire enclosure of the camps, is gestured at in the words of Tatsuno as he reflects on his own home movie-making practice: “Despite the loneliness and despair that enveloped us, we made the best we could with the situation. I hope when you look at these you see the spirit of the people, people trying to reconstruct a community despite overwhelming obstacles. This, I feel, is the essence of these home movies” (Ishizuka, 2008:130).

### Evoking Filmic Space

Laura Marks (2004) writes of the way in which intercultural cinema often works to invent “histories and memories in order to posit an alternative to the overwhelming erasures, silences and lies of official histories” (p.24). Intercultural filmmakers, she argues, use experimental means to evoke and arouse the collective memories, which exceed the lived experience of the individual, particularly crucial in diasporic populations (p.62). Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory* (1991) juxtaposes disparate and diverse filmic material to explore the erasures and silences, the collective remembering and forgetting, caused in her own family by their internment during the Second World War. Combining the propagandistic footage of newsreels taken at the camps with Hollywood depictions of the internment process and sections of the home movie footage taken by Dave Tatsuno, the film creates and maintains a fraught tension between the visible and the invisible, between what is remembered and what is forgotten.

The critical fulcrum for this tension is Tajiri's own footage, in which she reconstructs her mother's 'only memory' of the camp. Acting the role of her mother, she is filmed in the blazing sun bending down in front of a gushing tap to fill a metal canteen. The water gurgles around the neck of the flask and she puts it down and cups her hands to the water, splashing it over her face. The cumulative effect of Tajiri's montage is a kind of filmic extrapolation to evoke the invisible. "By bringing together visual and audio images that are inadequate alone and contradictory together," writes Marks, "Tajiri is able to evoke scenes and events that can't be reconstructed" (p.32). *History and Memory* evokes the willfully forgotten, the repressed and the imagined, and the filmic place created by Tatsuno's home movies is amongst the ephemeral, elusive 'events', which Tajiri makes tangible to us as viewers.

In the twelfth minute of the film, a shot of Tajiri bent at the tap cuts to a sequence from Dave Tatsuno's home movie footage. We hear a distant storm brewing. A man smiles, an impossibly blue sky framing his dark handsome face. Men mess about for the camera as they take a break from digging a ditch. A girl's face, in close up, is smiling broadly. We hear Tajiri's voice: "*I could remember a time of great sadness before I was born.*" An old man sweeps snow: "*We had been moved, uprooted.*" shots of a sunset, icicles hanging over a doorframe, two children on a sledge, "*I had no idea where these memories came from, yet I knew the place*". The cut from a group of Japanese men talking to a shot of a white man wearing a smart trilby hat, about to say something, is marked by a roll of thunder and a change in texture and colour. The man's face, set against the backdrop of a film set, stays on the screen just a split second before we look down on a girl in a red jumper, shot from above. She glides smoothly over a square patch of ice set in the grey-brown barren earth that we know from the earlier shots of the camps. We hear the sound of men speaking, the delivery of their lines carries the atmosphere of Hollywood:

*"I was looking for a man named Kimoko..."*

*"Kimoko? Sure I remember him, Japanese farmer, never had a chance."*

The girl turns on the ice, carefully displaying her best moves.

*"Oh?"*

*"Got here in '41, just before Pearl Harbour"*

The shot shifts, we are closer to the girl and we see that she is skating in a smart black skirt and festive red and white sweater, a matching red bow in her hair.

*“Three months later they shipped him off to a relocation site... tough...”*

From the flickering silvery footage of the girl skating smoothly and steadily around the square patch of ice we cut back to the man in the trilby. As the men continue to speak, a title on the screen identifies the origin of the footage: *“Bad Day at Blackrock, 1954, MGM, Directed by John Sturges”*. We return to the girl skating, in silence, as the camera shows closer shots of her feet and pans to follow them as she skates past, the sharp blades of her white skates scarring the ice.

Marks has described Tajiri’s deployment of this footage as critical in stimulating a deep engagement between viewer and film, which moves beyond a sensory engagement with the girl skating, ensuring a recreation of the scene in “higher expansions of memory and on deeper strata of reality” (2000:48). She borrows from Deleuze the description of these ‘thin’ images as ‘optical images’. Where the sensory-motor images of movement image cinema follow the actions of protagonists, they are fulfilled and made sense of through that action. Optical images, argues Deleuze, refuse to bring the image into action and, left hanging, that image is made sense of through the viewer’s engagement of her own memory. Since the image of the girl skating, and particularly the juxtaposition of these images with images and sounds from *Bad Day at Black Rock*, cannot be explained, we puzzle over them (p.47), not only delving into our own memories to make sense of them but into the possible networks of meaning of which the images are a part. This act of making sense of these images, in the context of the plethora of images and sounds which Tajiri assembles, “calls up volumes of images that are not or cannot be represented” (p.43). As we view this sequence we do not merely experience this footage ‘on its own terms’, as the depiction of a body in movement. As this scene encourages us to engage our own memories, and particularly our memories of other cine-mimetic experiences, we experience its images as generative of an imagined place. As we experience ourselves-as-other in relation to this assemblage of images we are open to an experience of the imagined place that the girl in the red jumper occupies and creates as the home movie camera before her is co-opted in a process of emplacement.

Robert Rosen has read the shots of the girl skating, which are also incorporated in a more prosaic sequence of *Something Strong Within*, as an indicator of “the unwillingness of an individual and her community to accept the diminished status of prisoners without hope” (2008:112). His analysis is based on what is visible in the picture: the communally constructed rink against the backdrop of the grim barracks, the pursuit of leisure activity in the context of incarceration. This sequence from *History and Memory* offers a subtly different perspective. Tajiri’s work emphasises the creative act of filming, the cinematic nature of the images created and their transformation of ice, barracks and girl as they become parts of a cinematic place, as the central act of defiance and assertion of dignity. This cinematic place, Tajiri’s film asserts, is a beacon of hope in a shifting landscape of dislocation, oppression and forgetting. *History and Memory*, and this sequence in particular, suggest the potential of filmmaking as a tool for ethnographic exploration of filmic place and emphasises the need for such filmmaking to challenge the realist conventions of the observational tradition. Whilst a montage of Tatsuno’s footage cut according to the realist paradigm of continuity editing would show the girl skating in a bleak camp, and might even give us a corporeal sense of the chill of the air and the feeling of the rutted ice beneath her toes, Tajiri’s work evokes a sense of the images of the girl skating as oriented and entwined in complex invisible networks, both ‘real’ and imagined, of history and memory.

## Conclusion

Although anthropology’s movement away from the text-based approach of a Geertzian conceptual framework and towards phenomenologically inflected work has been felt as visual anthropologists have begun to use audiovisual media to explore corporeal spaces, this conceptual shift has not been extended to a phenomenological analysis of the ways in which audiovisual media work to structure our relationship with the world around us. Such an analysis forces us to move beyond an understanding of the way in which audiovisual media allow us to enter the corporeal spaces of others and towards an understanding of the way in which these media contribute to the transformation of that which they depict and the creation of imagined places. The inherently transformative place-making

quality of audiovisual media has been harnessed, throughout modern history, in the vernacular use of film and video. This use of vernacular media to transform lives, creating filmic places, has been particularly important in diasporic and de-territorialised communities where the need to reinforce the positivity of collective memory or escape the silences and erasures of official history has been particularly strong. The work of experimental filmmakers, such as Tajiri, who obliquely juxtapose sounds and images to explore such imagined places, makes this clear and seems to offer a jumping off point from which visual anthropology might develop a more satisfactory engagement with vernacular audiovisual practices.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FOUND FOOTAGE FILMS AS ETHNOGRAPHIES OF FILMIC PLACES

“We constitute our souls by making up our lives, that is by weaving stories about our past, by what we call memories. The tales we tell of ourselves and to ourselves are not a matter of recording what we have done and how we have felt. They must mesh with the rest of the world and with other people’s stories, at least in the externals, but their real role is in the creation of a life, a character, a self”

Michelle Citron (1999:138)

#### Introduction

Catherine Russell (1999) has suggested that found footage filmmaking be considered a type of experimental ethnography, which offers useful insights into the relationships between societies at large and the mass media they consume. This chapter builds on that proposal, arguing for found footage filmmaking as an ideal way for visual anthropologists to explore and evoke the mediated experiences of others. I will use close readings of four autobiographical films that incorporate home movie to illustrate the ways in which such found footage filmmaking can work to evoke, in the mind of the viewer, the imagined selves and worlds, the senses of filmic emplacement, generated through the production and consumption of vernacular moving images. Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1979), Su Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim* (1990) and the videotapes by Richard Fung *The Way to My Fathers Village* (1988), *My Mothers Place* (1990), all manipulate home movie images from the filmmakers’ own childhoods. By undermining the status of home movie images as indexical representations, these films emphasise the role of those images as negotiations between lived and imagined experience. Juxtaposing home movie images with other images and sounds, and controlling their order and flow, these films evoke a sense not only of the corporeal spaces of the filmmakers’ lives,

but also of the filmic spaces brought into being through their relationships with moving images.

### Found Footage Filmmaking

‘Found footage’ is a term that has been used in conjunction with a long tradition of compiling footage from pre-existing film sources, combining it in sequences whose meaning is more than the sum of their parts. Jay Leyda (1964) traces the history of this tradition through the work of Esther Schub, working in 1920s Russia, and early experimentation by the godfather of documentary realism, Grierson, whose 1929 found footage film, *Conquest*, has been overshadowed in film history by his social realist *Drifters* made in the same year (p.20). My use of the term ‘found footage’ follows the tradition marked out by Leyda referring not to the films of documentary realism which include clips from various different sources to illustrate an argument, but to films whose organising principle is the incorporation of already existing material with ontologically disparate footage. Cinematic assemblages which necessarily challenge the truth claims of documentary realism.

William Wees (1993) concurs with this interpretation describing found footage filmmaking as the “juxtaposition of pre-existing elements extracted from their original contexts, diverted from their original, intended uses, and thereby made to yield previously unrecognised significance” (p.52). He makes a clear distinction between films *with* found footage and found footage films. Where found footage is used in documentary compilations to signify reality or appropriated as simulacra of reality, as in music videos for example, they do not challenge the relationship between the image and pro-filmic reality. In found footage films this critique is foremost. Re-cycled images in found footage films, Wees argues, bring our attention to their status *as images* and to their context of production, to their ways of making meaning (p.32).

The potential importance of this type of filmmaking to anthropology has been suggested by Catherine Russell’s proposition that it be considered a form of ‘experimental ethnography’. Russell has used close readings of Bruce Conner’s *A Movie* (1958), *The Atomic Café* by Jayne Loader and Kevin and Pierce Rafferty

(Loader et al., 1982), Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1985), Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99* (1991), and Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* series (1981-1994) to show both the value of these audiovisual works as 'ethnographic documents' and the potential usefulness of found footage filmmaking as an ethnographic tool (1999:239). Russell reads found footage filmmaking as a way out of the representational bind into which the use of moving images in anthropology has often entangled us. Found footage films, she argues, challenge objectivity, the authority of vision and the hegemonic voice of history (p.239). They allow for a discourse between history and memory not facilitated in the more homogenous representations of documentary realism. Most importantly here, the use of readymade images allows the filmmaker a sense of distance from the body as it is filmed (p.238) and the hope of a more reflexive engagement with moving images. The found image "is no longer representative of culture, but an element of culture, as signifier of itself" (p.238).

Russell describes the found footage film as a form without indexical referent, without the pro-filmic place implied in realist representations. "The appropriated image," she writes,

"points back to the pro-filmic past as if it were a parallel universe of science fiction: a science fiction space that exists parallel to the normal space of the diegesis – a rhetorically heightened 'other realm'. There is no diegesis of a found footage film, no represented non-contradictory world, only the traces of a reality (or multiple realities) outside the film, beyond representation." (p.241)

We might think of the diegesis of the found footage film, this 'rhetorically heightened other realm', as analogous to the filmic places evoked by Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory*, conceptualised and described in Chapter 1. Tajiri's film evokes a pro-filmic past, which incorporates imagined as well as lived experience. Its shape is determined as much by the collective memory of pain and loss and the imagined places created through the making of home movies as by the physical places brought into being through lived experiences of the camps. Whilst this pro-filmic past, this diegesis, is hazy and ephemeral and experienced differently by

each viewer of her film, it is as powerfully evoked by Tajiri as any pro-filmic corporeal 'reality' might be.

This sense of the usefulness of found footage filmmaking, as allowing an insight into and analysis of the ways in which individuals and groups are emplaced in relation to, and through, audiovisual media, is neatly summarised in Russell's own reading of *The Atomic Café* (1982). This film uses footage from military archives juxtaposed with sounds and images from many sources including television, propaganda films, popular songs, radio programmes and Hollywood movies, to explore the US relationship with nuclear warfare through the 1940s, 50s and 60s. As Russell points out, what emerges through this montage of material is a powerful evocation of the collective consciousness of the nation during this period. It is an evocation of the collective sense of fear but also of the collective imagining of the possibility of safety, both of which are strongly linked to the nation's relationship with audiovisual media. Russell describes the children we see hiding under their school desks in a clip from a propaganda film. We experience these children, she argues, as performing their fear of nuclear holocaust, but we are also aware that this performance contributes to the creation of both imagined danger and security (p.257). *The Atomic Café*, then, evokes in us, as viewers, a sense of the filmic spaces powerfully at work in the lives of the US public during this period.

#### Autobiographical Found Footage Films as Ethnography

Russell's analysis of found footage filmmaking goes some way in suggesting the usefulness of such an approach in the anthropological investigation of the relationship between societies at large and the mass media that they consume. It is, however, where found footage filmmaking has been used at closer range to explore the role of audiovisual media in the experiences of individuals and families, that ethnographic film as I conceptualise it here, might find a more useful model. The autobiographical films of Michelle Citron (Citron, 1978), and Su Friedrich (Friedrich, 1990) and the videos of Richard Fung (Fung 1988, 1990), juxtapose home movie footage from the filmmakers' childhoods with other images and sounds in found footage assemblages. All of these works can be read as ethnographic films in that they are the product of a consciously investigative

process in which the filmmaker has set out, through the making of the film and within the film itself, to investigate her or his place in the world, questioning the relationship between memory and lived identity and interrogating the role of audiovisual media in mediating that dynamic. Michael Renov has described the way in which autobiographical films, through which filmmakers represent other members of their families, “could be said to enact a kind of participant observation that illuminates the familial other while simultaneously refracting a self-image” (2004:219). Whilst Renov specifically cites Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim*, Citron and Fung, as well as Friedrich herself, have reflected on the extent to which their engagement in the process of making these films has been one of discovery, uncovering false memories, remembering repressed facts and re-thinking the role of moving images in relationships.

This process of discovery might be read as a filmic version of ethnography’s “sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives” (Pink, 2009:3). By augmenting contact with human agents in their everyday lives through a filmic contact with moving images of everyday life, these filmic (auto) ethnographies are not only richly rendered accounts of lived experience, but filmic texts which evoke the imagined places which those everyday images create. As they enter into close involvement with the moving images of their pasts, these filmmakers define, evoke and explore the shape and nature of imagined places, families, and selves, made possible through their relationships with the home movie camera and the reels it produces. The assemblages they create, the found footage films *Daughter Rite* (Citron, 1978), and *Sink or Swim* (Friedrich, 1990), and the videos *Way to My Father’s Village* (Fung, 1988) and *My Mother’s Place* (Fung, 1990) make these imagined places and selves available to the viewer.

Michelle Citron’s voice opens *Daughter Rite*. The soft and grainy, slowly and haltingly moving image of the face of a woman, hair set in shiny waves, is replaced by the smooth, straight-haired head of a little girl, shot from the side. A spoon between her lips, an egg balances on its end as the girl carefully concentrates, putting one foot in front of the other. The camera follows her, tightly trailing her progress through a crowd before returning to the older woman, who we see now clutching the spoon in her mouth. The camera pulls back and she places the egg

and spoon between the child's lips. Citron's voice underlies these images, describing the emotional impetus behind the making of this film; her fear at becoming 28, the age at which her mother had married and given birth to her, and not 'doing like her mother'. "*It was this fear, on my twenty-eighth birthday, which started the process which has become this film.*"

In the process which 'became' *Daughter Rite*, Citron filmically engaged with home movies from her own childhood, optically reprinting them and adding words in her own voice, a poetic and often contradictory undercurrent. She remembers scenes from her childhood, describes contemporary conversations with her mother, and reflects on her daily experiences and dreams. These passages are interspersed with scenes shot in the style of observational documentary (but in fact acted) in which two young women deal with the illness of their mother and discuss their past and their relationship with her. *Daughter Rite* juxtaposes the smiling scenes of a happy childhood with words and ideas that open up the slippery dynamic relationship between these images and the filmmaker's memories. This process has been described by Citron as one of revelation. Writing about the making of *Daughter Rite* she has described the way in which it 'burned peepholes' through a wall of amnesia, allowing her to remember the sexual abuse she had suffered as a child, images to which she had no access, until she began to materialise the imagined place from which they are so resolutely banished (Citron, 1999:137).

Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* can be read as an investigation of the filmmaker's father and her relationship with him and of the importance of fantasy and imagination in that relationship. Formally more complex than *Daughter Rite*, *Sink or Swim* combines black and white footage from diverse sources in scenes which are entitled according to the letters of the alphabet starting from Z and working back to A. The film traces Friedrich's relationship with her domineering and emotionally distant father through memories and anecdotes from their shared past narrated by a female child. The story describes 'a little girl' who, on declaring to her father that she wants to learn to swim, is thrown into the deep end, who is terrified by his tales of dangerous aquatic animals but who, nevertheless, becomes a keen swimmer. There is a strong sense in the film of the disparity between the world in which the girl and the adult filmmaker live, and the one she desires and

their effect on one another. Near the beginning of the film Friedrich adds her childhood perception of her father as “*the smartest and most handsome man she’d ever met*” to a long liturgy of fantasised interpretations of everyday experiences: mermaids swimming with her near a jetty, her bicycle as a black stallion, the water in the gutter as the Nile river.

What emerges in *Sink or Swim* is a detailed evocation and exploration of these imagined selves, their relationship to lived experience, and the central importance of the moving image in that negotiation. Bell and Zryd have written about the film in terms of its even-handed exploration of human relations, “Even though a cruel father emerges,” they write, “there is such a strong attempt to understand him that he does not come across as an archetypal villain. Friedrich obviously shares much with her father, for she too is an anthropologist of sorts, her camera observing and recording the ritual of father-daughter relationships” (2002). Friedrich’s camera and perhaps more importantly her deft juxtaposition of images and sounds in this work, do not simply observe and record such relationships, they evoke and explore the place of moving images in those relationships.

The search for a ‘missing’ history and an acceptance of the importance of the imagined in the constitution of the available and accepted version of past events can be traced through the video works of Richard Fung. Fung’s tapes *Way to My Father’s Village* and *My Mother’s Place* include home movie footage from his childhood alongside family photographs, specially filmed footage and interviews as well as archive footage. Like Citron, Fung has described the filmic process involved in making these works as a formative and revealing one. In *Way to My Father’s Village* he notes his surprise, on visiting his father’s home village in China for the first time (a trip he made as part of the process of making the film), at his own inability to imagine his father in that environment. “The images I attached to the stories he told me when I was a child,” says Fung, “were too strong to change, memory of the real and memory of the imagined become indistinguishable”. In *My Mothers Place*, Fung describes a memory of his mother’s village in Trinidad and his sudden realisation, during the making of the tape, that this memory was false and that, in fact, he had never been there. Fung’s attempt to pick apart the complex relationship between memory of the real and memory of the imagined

extends to, and through, his analysis of the role of home movies. “Home movies,” Richard Fung has written, “do not speak for themselves. By the use of juxtaposition, slowing down the images and adding onscreen captions and voiceover narration, my aim was to get beyond the surface of the images, to denaturalise them and foreground their embedded ideology” (2008:35).

Inherent in all of these works, and in the investigative process they enact, is an intrinsic critique of the filmic medium itself. All of the films shun and are, to some extent, part of a reaction against the narrow realist conventions of the documentary form and particularly the social realist documentaries of the 1960s. Bill Nichols specifically cites *Daughter Rite* and *Sink or Swim* as forming part of a movement against the small scale, observational quality of documentary film in the 60s and a return to modernist techniques, which had been rejected during a period in which realism dominated non-fiction filmmaking (2001:608). Inspired by the ‘structural’ films of the 1970s, the films constantly reflect on and explore their own materiality and their own ways of making meaning. All of the films are, in a sense, meditations on the impossibility of objective representation, acknowledging the central importance of the imagined in the way our construction and understanding of the ‘real’.

By juxtaposing home movie footage with ontologically distinct images, by underlaying them with sounds that unearth them and by intervening in their logic by slowing them down, freeze framing them and superimposing them, Citron, Fung and Friedrich turn their home movies into the type of ‘optical images’ described in Chapter 1. In forcing the often clichéd images from home movies into situations which decontextualise them, their films and videos force us beyond a sensorial engagement with the images before us, beyond the corporeal places of the scenes so familiar to us (the birthday parties, summer holidays and sunny lawns ubiquitously reproduced in Euro-American home movies), and encourage us to engage with these images as negotiations between lived and imagined places and selves. All of the films encourage us to deploy memories of cine-mimetic experiences – our own experience of self-as-other in relation to audiovisual materials – as well as memories of lived experiences in making sense of their cinematic montages. As the filmmaker guides our experience of this “volume of

images that are not or cannot be represented” (Marks, 2000:43), we experience a sense of her emplacement in relation to the moving images she shows us. Our experience of the film evokes, in our minds, a sense of the imagined places and selves brought into being through her relationship with those images.

### The Filmic Space Between Images

The autobiographical found footage works of Citron, Fung and Friedrich all surround images from home movies with images from other sources. Fung and Friedrich juxtapose home movie footage from their own childhoods with sequences from contemporaneous newsreels and television. These juxtapositions give us a sense of the filmmakers’ remembered childhood relationships with these images of mass media – their interactions with which generated particular senses of self-as-other – and imply the relationship between this experience of an imagined place and self and the mimetic performances materialised in home movies. In *Sink or Swim*, Friedrich structures disparate materials into a rich and meandering pattern which has been interpreted in terms of her desire to evoke a sense of memory and emphasise the importance of the past in structuring present experience (Cutler, 2007). I would like to expand this analysis to suggest that Friedrich uses the juxtaposition between contrasting moving images to explore the force of her imaginative relationships with audiovisual assemblages, particularly those of television, and their impact on both memory and lived experience both past and present.

Friedrich uses the cinematic montage of *Sink or Swim* to evoke a sense of her own emplacement in relation to moving images, including those of home movies. Her juxtaposition of the televised images with home movie footage suggests the mimetic function of that home movie in materialising the imagined place, incarnating the imagined self brought into being through her engagements with the television. The fifth scene of the film, entitled ‘Utopia’, begins this evocation of the televisual world, and imaginary life, of Friedrich’s childhood. Two young women, dressed in shiny stockings and military coats, stand in front of a curtain, where they paw the ground with one foot, facing one another in a choreographed imitation of prancing horses. They pull aside the curtain to reveal a real horse,

which the camera follows around the ring in front of us. *“The girl and her sister,”* Friedrich’s little girl alter ego explains, *“were forbidden to eat sugar and their Dad refused to buy a television set but once a week they were transported into a world of pleasure”*. We see trapeze artists in sequined leotards, as they climb and swing. She goes on to describe weekly trips to visit the man across the hall, who would allow them to make ice cream sundaes and watch TV. *“The lights were turned off, the TV was turned on, and they sat in the dark for an hour and watched Don and Michees flying circus show.”* Male acrobats, nearly naked, their bodies blackened and gleaming, move slowly across the screen.

On either side of this scene from the circus, grainy black and white images show a little girl with a pudding bowl haircut. She is wearing dungarees and toddling around a sunny lawn, clasping the legs of an adult man beside her. These home movie scenes, which we identify with Friedrich’s own body as a child, are experienced in relation to the dramatic and lavish scenes from the television. We sense Friedrich’s wonder and her sense of herself-as-other as she sits in the dark of her neighbour’s flat and watches sparkling bodies fly through the air. The home movie footage seems to reach towards this imagined place of wonderment as the camera moves between the smiling faces of adults and the fleshy body of the child.

As the sad story of Friedrich’s childhood unfolds, the television becomes increasingly important. *“One of the first things to enter her house after her father left was a black and white TV, and because her mother had gone back to work, the girl could come home from school and spend hours watching her favourite shows.”* A neat house stands in the sunshine, roses growing around the door, a white picket fence bordering the bottom of the screen. A smartly dressed older man looks at his watch, his wife brings him his briefcase and as they lean to kiss one another we see the three shining faces of their children. Fred Camper has described his perception of this image as ‘contradicting’ the space of the film: *“The compositional perfection of this image, and the way the children’s faces are reduced to objects, is utterly contrary to the style of Friedrich’s film. It contradicts the style of the home movies she uses, with their jerky images of active children, but it contradicts the overall space of the film as well”* (1991:27).



Still from *Sink or Swim* by Su Friedrich (1990)

Whilst there is certainly a tension between the different styles of footage in *Sink or Swim*, I read the relationship between Friedrich's home movie footage and these images from the televisual experiences of her childhood as a more complex and dynamic one of reflection and refraction. The contradiction between the images creates a resonance that gives us a sense of Friedrich's relationship with them. Like Rea Tajiri's juxtaposition of images from the internment camp with the images and sounds from '*Bad Day at Blackrock*', which I described in Chapter 1, this juxtaposition of ontologically different images serves to render each strange, turning them into thin, 'optical images'. The images are uncoupled from their directly indexical relationship with lived experience and we accept them as negotiations between the lived and the imagined. As we deploy our own memories of lived and mediated experiences in making sense of the images before us, as we experience ourselves-as-other in relation to them, we come closer to Friedrich's own imagined relationships with these moving images. This process gives us a sense of the imagined places and selves – the filmic places – brought into being through Friedrich's relationship with the home movie camera.

In the final scene of *Sink or Swim* a young Friedrich stands on a beach, mid frame and dressed in a swimsuit. She looks towards the camera. We hear her adult voice, for the first time in the film, begin a children's alphabet song, "A, B, C, D, E, F, G..."

As she sings, she doubles up the image of herself and her voice, creating a round of both vision and sound. As the screen becomes thick with overlaid images it darkens and Friedrich's girlish body is lost in a tangle of limbs and shadows. One after the other the girls walk along the beach and out of shot. The image again begins to thin down until we are left with a single Friedrich, who stands, in a frozen frame, looking, still, towards the camera. "*Now I know my ABCs,*" sings the filmmaker, "*Tell me what you think of me*".



Stills from *Sink or Swim* by Su Friedrich (1990)

The image of Friedrich, standing on the beach, facing the camera and smiling, recalls the faces of the three children on the stairs and also has a particularly strong resonance with the pretty dancing girls who precede the entrance of the white horse at the circus. There is a strong sense that the home movie camera is being used not only to depict the young Friedrich but to transform her, that she is complicit in using the act of filming as the creation of a filmic place and a version of herself analogous to that which she has experienced when watching the television images which she has shown us. Like the Japanese girl skating in the internment camp described in Chapter 1, the young Friedrich is co-opting the movie camera in the creation of a more desirable place of belonging than that brought into being through lived experience.

These juxtapositions of images, then, make us acutely aware of the relationship between the images of mass media consumed by, and those made of and with, the filmmakers. We become aware of the specific style of the home movie and its particular way of mediating relationships with the world. Not only does Friedrich's performance on the beach emulate the body gestures of the television she watched

as a child. The style of the home movies themselves emulates that of the television she shares with us. Although this emulation is, as Camper points out, sometimes jerky or faltering, the home movie camera follows the children as smoothly as the skill of its operator allows, its pans, tilts and zooms reflecting those we see on the flickering television monitor.

In *Daughter Rite*, Michelle Citron uses the juxtaposition of home movie with staged observational scenes to emphasise the importance of cinematic style, the relationship between bodies and lens, in transforming the subjects before the camera. The second scene of the film uses home movie footage to follow two little girls, sitting either side of a lady with tightly set hair who seems to be their mother, as they float beneath a bridge on an open topped boat. The shot moves from wide to close up and the three smiling and waving figures are framed first approaching the camera, later as they pass it and lastly moving away from it, craning their heads round to smile as they move away. The girls wave again as they step off the boat and walk towards us. Fade to black. We move to a kitchen and an obviously staged observational scene where the two adult sisters sit at a table. The scene resembles the type of informal interview characteristic of documentary realism. Framed in mid shot, one sister faces the camera operator and speaks directly to her. The camera is steady and still, keeping the second sister, who is listening, framed on the left. The camera operator does not speak and her presence is only implicitly acknowledged through the eye contact of the speaker. This scene gives way to black and to another home movie sequence: the two girls and their mother walk towards the camera, framed in mid shot they smile and squint their eyes against the bright sun.

This dyadic contrast between observational scenes and home movie sequences creates a tension which, like Friedrich's juxtaposition of home movie with footage from the television, evokes the filmmaker's own relationship with the home movie footage we are watching and reinforces our sense that this relationship exceeds the indexical representation of bodies in movement. Citron uses the observational shooting and editing style as a cinematic straw doll, a representation of a pro-filmic reality in the ethnographic present of the film, constantly undermined by the fact that these scenes are obviously acted. *Daughter Rite* emphasises both

observational footage and home movie as transformative, and generative of a filmic place distinct from that inhabited by the body. The observational footage reads as a desperate attempt to control and discipline this wild potential of moving images. The home movie, against the ambiguously 'realist' canvas, begins to evoke, for us as viewers, a sense of the power of this transformative filmic place and its specific meanings in Citron's life.

#### Giving Shape to Filmic Places – The Space Between Images and Words

If it is the juxtaposition of ontologically distinct images which evokes filmic space in these films, giving us a sense of the imagined filmic places of the filmmakers' childhoods, it is the use of asynchronous voice-over which outlines the contours of those places. The voice of the filmmaker, or an alter ego of the filmmaker, is a central component in all of the films, and all contain a single, predominant voice throughout. The voice is the most undulating and human aspect in each of the films and our central focus of identification as physical beings. In all four of the works voices recount embodied memories, which often contradict the home movie images that simultaneously meet our eye. The voice embodies, in all of the work, the corporeal being of the filmmaker whose lived experiences, whose being in the world, makes possible, indeed necessitates, the cine-mimetic experiences materialised in the home movie reels. As we identify, as viewers, with the lived body evoked by the voice-over, our cine-mimetic experience of those reels begins to assimilate that of the filmmaker.

*"The phone call was from Mom,"* says Citron, as we see the lady with tight set hair sitting on the boat. *"Sounded very depressed, Dad had just moved out, was angry because Dad took the bedroom set which they had agreed would be hers."* The lady waves. She embraces the girls on either side of her, her arms around their shoulders as they, too, wave to the camera. *"Then she told me she had changed her mind again, she had put her house back on the market and she was moving to Hawaii."* The lady sticks her tongue out playfully, squinting her eyes as she looks up into the camera and towards the sun. Citron explains how unwise she considers her mother's move to Hawaii to be. *"She will still be the same person there, unhappy with herself, her life, running away, why is she so scared?"*



Stills from *Daughter Rite* by Michelle Citron (1979)

Citron's juxtaposition of contradictory words and images, which continues throughout *Daughter Rite*, becomes increasingly profound as she describes the difficulties of her present relationship with her mother and her own unhappiness rooted in difficult, often traumatic, childhood experiences which make no appearance in the home movie reels. The intimate tone of her testimony and the tension between the words we hear and the home movie images we see allow us to envisage the corporeal experiences of which we are given no images. We begin to feel the home movies through the adult body and with the adult pain, which Citron describes.

Although Friedrich distances the voice-over in *Sink or Swim* from her own body, using the voice of a child who speaks in the third person, her words, nonetheless, give shape to the filmic place her images evoke. Little girls in white dresses, their heads veiled and their hands adorned with neat white lace gloves, get out of cars and walk down the sidewalk and up the stairs of a church building. The images are loaded with the familiar nervousness of family ceremony. Parents tug at jackets and shirts whilst the girls check themselves out in the windows of the cars they pass and twitter nervously amongst themselves. This chapter of the story begins: "*The girl liked to sleep late, keep her room messy and fight with her sister.*" Her mother, desperate and exhausted by the fights with her 'wild' children appeals to her husband, their father, to 'do something'. One night, we hear, sick of the ineffectual cycle of minor threats and punishments, he decided: "*to take a*

*different approach. While the girls continued to fight, he went down the hall and turned on the faucets.”*

Making the girls kneel beside the tub, their father grabs them by the hair and forces their heads under the stream of cold water. ‘The girl’ (the young Friedrich, we assume) screams, kicks and punches, until she realises that she must resign herself to the pain growing in her chest. We see families posing to have their photographs taken, having left the church at the end of the ceremony, they smile for the camera, standing upright and proud.



Still from *Sink or Swim* by Su Friedrich (1990)

*“Her eyes were wide open, her lungs were going to explode, she was grabbing wildly at the air and screaming into the water when she suddenly felt his grip loosen on her neck.”* The smiling faces of the assembled families fade to black as we hear of the girl and her sister sitting on the floor of the bathroom, in puddles of cold water, their mother screaming and crying. Through this sequence Friedrich neatly acquaints us both with the corporeal place and the filmic place of her childhood. Furthermore, this sequence makes us, as viewers, need the shelter and comfort of the cinematic places the home movie images provide as much as we feel Friedrich does. By cinematically enclosing us between the uncomfortable corporeal places of her childhood and the imagined places facilitated by the use of home movie, Friedrich encourages us to emplace ourselves in relation to the latter,

identifying more with Friedrich's imagined self than with her panicking head under the cold stream of water.

Richard Fung's use of his own voice, which is often more didactic and straightforward than that of Citron and Friedrich, is nuanced and made more complex through his use of written subtitles. The section of *My Mother's Place* entitled *Family Pictures* uses a combination of still photographs and home movie footage in providing a short introduction to the Fung family. When his parents were married, the voice of Fung tells us: "Dad had nothing and she worked as a shop clerk for three dollars a day. I get lost." He goes on, over images of neatly dressed children (Fung and his sister, we assume) playing in a garden "in the details of the intervening years". The girl rides a bike over a well-kept lawn, bordered by flowers. The little boy runs gleefully after her, waving his arms in the air. The children come to a halt in front of the camera and hold up a transistor radio, showing it off with radiant smiles. "Was it four or five in the morning that she would get up to bake the bread for the shop?" Fung asks himself.



Still from *My Mother's Place* by Richard Fung (1990)

Superimposed onto this scene, in white text, which partly obscures both bicycle and transistor radio, we read the words: "Mom made me shorts from Chick feed bags. They were comfortable but I refused to wear them after a neighbor called me 'Chicky Chicky'." Fung's use of voice and text works to reveal the home movies

of his childhood as vital tools in creating alternative selves contributing to the videos' unearthing of the home movie reels as carefully choreographed performances. Later in the same sequence the performative nature of the home movies is made very explicit through a title superimposed on moving images of Fung as a boy. He is with his mother in what looks like a public park. They are smartly dressed and smilingly stroll around on the grass. The title simply reads: "*These pictures show more about my family's desires than how we actually lived.*"

This use of words to go beyond a sense of the embodied presence of the filmmaker, to encourage an identification with her imagined self, is taken further through Michelle Citron's recounting of dreamed and imagined scenes. In *Daughter Rite*, Citron hints at the repressed memories of corporeal terror, which she later writes about (1999), as she describes an adult dream in which her mother and grandmother try to inject her with a huge syringe. As Citron vividly recounts her memory of this dream we see images of little girls at a children's tea party. Citron and her sister wear pretty dresses and one blows out the candles on a cake, sitting on her mother's lap. They open presents and eat party food. This juxtaposition takes us beyond a cine-mimetic relationship with Citron's lived body to an imagined relationship with the body she imagines in her dream. As we listen to her adult nightmare and we relate to her story through our own memories of (bad) dreaming, our experiences of the images we see become bound up with our own mental processes of fantasy and imagining. In this way an affinity is developed between the way in which we imagine ourselves and Citron's imagining of herself. This sequence generates a resonance between the fearful imagined body we experience through nightmares and the sugary utopia offered in the home movie we see. This experience gives us a strong sense of Citron's own ambivalent relationship with the images of her childhood, her own filmic emplacement in relation to these images.

#### Beyond Image and Sound – The Affinity of Imagined Bodies

Having evoked and mapped out the shape of the filmic places brought into being by home movies through their juxtaposition with other images and sounds, Citron,

Fung and Friedrich all add emphasis to this evocation through manipulations of the home movie images they appropriate. By intervening in their rhythms and orders by re-photographing them, repeating them, slowing them down and superimposing them, the filmmakers physically materialise their own relationship with them. These materialisations of imagined processes further encourage the viewer towards an experience of the home movie images, which is similar to that of the filmmaker. It fosters the affinity between our imagined selves and theirs. All three filmmakers use re-photography: Citron optically reprints the 8mm movies from her childhood onto 16mm reels, Friedrich films in 16mm from the television screen, and, whilst Fung's 8mm home movies seem to have been mechanically transferred to video tape, he extensively engages with still photographs through the video camera. This explicit acknowledgement of images as received through mediating technology heightens our sense that there is no singular pro-filmic place of the ethnographic present. The acknowledgement of the distance between us as viewers and the bodies we see also leaves a space for manipulations that reinforce and emphasise the transformative power of these moving images in the lives of the filmmakers.

Citron's use of step-frame reprinting in *Daughter Rite* gives the home movie a jerky and lilted movement. Each image lingers on the screen before it gives in to the next. This slow and halting movement calls our attention to the movie image as image, removing the 24 frames per second illusion of continuous movement and further hollowing out our ability to accept the image as cliché or indexical representation. Citron uses this mechanism to measure and guide the nature of our engagement with the images before us. The slow progression of the shuddering images allows us to fully take in each image before it is replaced by the next. Cuts become visible, perceptible, and the frames Citron has chosen to include, and their order, are vital. Our attention is drawn to particular images as they hover on the screen longer than the rest. The step framing mechanises human movement, subordinating it to the will of the film reel, and since all movement seems unnatural and robotic, Citron is able to manipulate bodies in repetitions and cycles of movement that fit with this logic.

“*Mom is moving away, six thousand miles, and she won’t even stop in Madison to visit me for a day before she leaves.*” The woman we now recognise as Citron’s mother walks towards the camera, a little girl to each side of her, an arm around each. As they approach the lens the mother looks towards the smaller girl, as if to ask her a question. They take another few steps towards the camera before instantaneously retreating to their original position, from which they again walk towards us. As Citron describes her frustration at her difficult relationship with her mother she traps us, with her mother and her sister, in this image of repeated futility. Backwards and forwards the three figures go, six times, until we are finally released and the film moves on. This allows us to experience Citron’s frustration with the disparity between her physical closeness to her mother in the movie image and the emotional and physical distance she describes in their contemporary lives. What seems a cathartic, almost revengeful, treatment of her mother in this sequence, reveals to us (and possibly to her) the deeply idealistic nature of the home movie reel we are watching, and the centrality of its function in creating a sense of closeness which is, ultimately, elusive and unsatisfying.

Su Friedrich uses the freeze framing of home movie in *Sink or Swim* to similarly interrogate and reveal its meaning. The fourth chapter of the film, and the first to use home movie, is entitled *Witness*. A man holds a podgy toddler aloft. The baby’s fat legs dangle between his arms. He bends down, and the child disappears beneath the bottom of the frame before shooting up through its middle and into the air where she is left by the freezing of the frame, held in the air, diving towards the man’s open hands for a couple of seconds before descending towards them, pausing twice mid-way, her arms stiffly stretched before her, before she flops back into his paternal grasp. After leaving the sequence to play on momentarily, the image freezes again, this time on a close up of the father’s young face in profile. This sequence feels like an exploration of the role of its own images in the mediation as well as the representation of Friedrich’s relationship with her father. We sense that she is willing the images to permanently incarnate the imagined scenes which we use to make sense of them: the romantic and happy family, the smart and good looking father, of her childhood television-fuelled fantasies. And we, tangibly, experience her pain at the impossibility of this exercise.

This 'locking in' of our cinematic consciousness, the creation of affinity, is reinforced through the superimposition of images. In *Way to My Father's Village*, Fung uses the superimposition of images from home movie to conclude a long and rich sequence in which he juxtaposes still and moving images from his father's lifetime and his own childhood with reflections on his identity and autobiography. "When I came up to Canada, people would always look alarmed when I opened my mouth. For them, my accent didn't match my face. They would ask, where was I from and did I feel Chinese or Trinidadian." These words are accompanied by images of Fung, with his sister, on the beach in Trinidad, overlaid with home movie images made at a meeting of First Nations peoples in Canada.



Still From *Way to My Father's Village* by Richard Fung (1990)

As we see the young Fung run along the beach and simultaneously move over the dancing men at the Canadian pow-wow, the fact that these moving images exceed the possibilities and limits of his corporeal body is materialised before us. This layering, a way of combining but also of confusing the two images, manifests and makes tangible Fung's relationship with them and the imagined places that they materialise for him. We sense that the place created by the home movie images, the place created by his family's desires to be something that they were not, remains a more important location of identity for Fung than those physical bounded nations between which he has moved.

## Conclusion

The films I have discussed in this chapter demonstrate the potential of found footage filmmaking to evoke and explore the filmic places brought into being through our relationships with moving images. The work of Citron, Fung and Friedrich emphasises the extent to which home movies are active agents in generative processes of emplacement and make the imagined places and selves brought into being through their own engagements with home movies tangible to us as viewers. By juxtaposing ontologically distinct footage, these works disrupt any assumed relationship between moving images and lived experience. By emphasising the transformative power of all audiovisual media, they encourage us to engage with their images as negotiations between lived and imagined places and selves. Their juxtaposition of the filmmakers' (often traumatic) memories of the lived experiences of childhood with images from home movies encourages an affinity between the imagined self experienced by the viewer in relation to those images and that of the filmmaker. In this way these films allow the viewer a sense of the imagined places and selves brought into being through their authors' relationships with moving images.

Our deployment of sense memories in relationship to MacDougall's sequence depicting the Sardinian shepherd making cheese in *Tempus de Baristas* (1997), described in Chapter 1, gives us a sense of the lived experience of that moment as we experience ourselves-as-other in relation to it. Similarly, our deployment of memories, both of lived and mediated experiences, in response to these found footage sequences gives us a sense of the lived and imagined experiences of those depicted and described. Read as audiovisual ethnographies, these films provide richly layered accounts of the role of home movies in the lives of Citron, Fung and Friedrich, which emphasise the importance of that technology in materialising places of belonging distinct from those brought into being through lived experience. More importantly, in the context of this project these films suggest formal approaches to the evocation and exploration of these imagined places that can be applied more broadly in the anthropological investigation of vernacular moving images.

## CHAPTER THREE

### EXPLORING THE SAN FRANCISCO FILMIC PLACE

#### Video-based Ethnography

“We can, by aligning our bodies, rhythms, tastes, ways of seeing, and more with theirs, begin to become involved in making places that are similar to theirs and thus feel that we are similarly emplaced... In doing so, we should be better enabled to understand how others remember and imagine (in ways that might not be articulated verbally) through their own immediate emplaced experiences”

Sarah Pink (2009:40)

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will describe the video-based ethnographic fieldwork through which I attempted to move towards an understanding of the way in which event videos work to bring into being imagined places of belonging important to the San Francisco transnational community. This approach draws on techniques of ‘sensory ethnography’ developed through the phenomenologically inflected anthropology described in Chapter 1 but attempts to move beyond of the use of documentary realist video techniques. The use of video to explore and record the corporeal spaces of lived experience is replaced by an attempt to understand the way in which event videos relate to those lived spaces through active participation in their production and consumption. By augmenting close and prolonged physical involvement in day-to-day life at various sites in the transnational community with videographic involvements – an apprenticeship through which I attempted to align my way of making a video with that of the San Francisco videographer, structured viewings of event videos through which I attempted to align my way of watching the video with that of the San Francisco migrant and a video messaging project

through which I offered an alternative channel of communication – I aimed to experience a sense of emplacement in relation to event videos which was similar to that of my interlocutors. This process of learning how to make and experience San Francisco event videos enabled insights into the imagined places and selves brought into being through their production and consumption. By materialising my experience of emplacement – my sense of these imagined places and selves – in ‘found footage’ video sequences which I shared with research participants, I was able to externalise the workings of my own imagination and move towards a more complete understanding of the imagined processes of my interlocutors in relation to event videos, an understanding embodied in the video *900,000 Frames Between Us*.

#### Evoking and Exploring the Filmic Places of Others

The films of Citron, Friedrich and Fung, which I looked at in detail in Chapter 2, are manifestations of investigative processes through which the filmmakers evoke and explore their imaginative engagements with their own home movies. These films materialise the filmmakers’ sense of emplacement in relation to the home movies of their childhood. They make tangible connections between the actual images of home movies and the imagined processes, to which those images are connected in the filmmakers’ minds. They give us a sense of the imagined places the reels bring into being. For Citron, Friedrich and Fung the process of expressing their sense of filmic emplacement through found footage work is essentially one of introspection – thinking through the links between memory, fantasy and lived experience and the way in which these relate to and are related through moving images from the past. Whilst the philosophical grounding and formal approaches which govern these filmmakers’ work offer a firm foundation for thinking through the ways in which visual anthropology might engage with vernacular media, there is more work, and work of a different kind, to be done by the anthropologist who wishes to engage with, evoke and explore, the filmic places and mediated experiences of others.

Michael Jackson (1983) proposes ‘kinaesthetic learning’, in which an emphasis is placed on embodied knowledge, as the true starting point for anthropological

understanding of another culture. When he asked his assistant to explain to him what specific elements of the initiation rites he was studying actually meant, he always got “the same answers: that the performances were simply contributing to the enjoyment of the occasion, and doing what was customary during initiations” (p.331). His physical participation in initiation rites enabled him to rethink them, not as super-organic cultural phenomena to be rationalised and explained through words, but as acts of collective practical mimesis; “distinctive modes of body use during initiation tend to throw up images in the mind whose form is most immediately determined by the pattern of body use” (p.336). Jackson’s practical, mimetic experience, therefore, opened the possibilities for posing different questions and enabled a more grounded, embodied understanding. Sarah Pink (2009) has stated the importance of such practical learning in terms of the way in which it allows us to become emplaced in affinity with those we are studying. As we emulate in our own lived experience, the relationships between body, mind and material world that are experienced by those we seek to understand, we move not only towards a sense that we “know places in other people’s worlds that are similar to the places and knowing of those others” (p.23). We also come closer to understanding the more intangible and internal aspects of lived experience: how those people experience, remember and imagine.

As I outlined in Chapter 1, our relationships with audiovisual media are generative of experiences of filmic emplacement analogous to the emplacement we experience in relation with the material world. As we engage both sense memories and memories of mediated experiences in making sense of the images and sounds of filmic assemblages before us, imagined places and selves are brought into being. Like the dialogical and dialectical engagements of lived experience through which we engage with the world around us, this relationship between body, mind and material, the world or the film happening ‘with’ us, is ephemeral and individual to each lived body. Like the places that are brought into being through lived experiences, however, the imagined places and selves brought into being through the mediated experiences of individuals in a particular community are likely to have collectively common elements which, as anthropologists, we can legitimately hope to both identify and understand through beginning to “become involved in making places that are similar to theirs” (Pink, 2009:40). This project attempts to

move towards such an understanding of the collectively imagined places and selves brought into being through the creation and consumption of event videos in the transnational community of San Francisco. This attempt is based on an investigation of both how the filmic assemblage of the event video relates to the lived experience of the *fiesta* and how the migrants' experience of that assemblage relates to other lived and mediated experiences.

Rooted in ongoing participant observation ethnography in the transnational community, investigation was carried out through five discrete but overlapping stages of video-based research that evolved in relationship with one another over two years of fieldwork and filming. Firstly, I undertook an apprenticeship with a videographer in San Francisco, learning to make event videos and eventually 'becoming' an event videographer myself. Secondly, I watched as many event videos as I could with migrants in the USA, sharing the space and time of spectatorship and keeping both a videographic and written record of my encounter. Thirdly, I undertook a video messaging project, offering a different space for videographic communication and carrying 'alternative' messages backwards and forwards across the border between migrants and their families. My fourth videographic strategy was to use the camera to create footage to express and reflect upon my experiences of making and watching videos with transnational families and the knowledge this process produced. Lastly, I shared experimental filmic assemblages – sequences edited to materialise my learned emplacement in relation to the event videos – as a way to externalise this invisible process and 'test it' against the responses of my interlocutors.

#### Participant Observation Videography – Making Event Videos

The main fieldwork elements of this project were realised over two trips to Mexico and the US in 2008 and 2009. The first of these was over three months, between June and September 2008. The central aim of this trip was to shadow an event videographer, acting as an apprentice in order to learn the skills involved in producing event videos. This technique of 'participant observation videography' was developed through preparatory work with Bengali wedding videographers in East London. I had met Rahman, a Bengali videographer, as he managed my local

Internet café where his wedding videos played on loop on a large plasma screen and clients often came to broker deals. The videos were far slicker than the San Francisco event videos but they shared something of the same atmosphere of optimistic opulence. As I chatted to Rahman I realised that his videos were involved in a similar transnational traffic of images and sounds, almost always being sent to families in Bangladesh. I shadowed Rahman over two months, going with him to weddings and their preceding henna ceremonies, asking him to explain what he was doing and why, and sitting with him while he watched and edited his footage. He was very keen for me to learn and it gradually became clear that he desperately needed female videographers to cover the ‘bride’s side’ at segregated Muslim weddings.

Working as a wedding videographer was more challenging than I expected and even after I had covered several ‘bride’s side’ ceremonies alone, Rahman still had to sit down with me to watch through the tapes, critiquing my shot style, framing and camera movements and pointing out important moments I had missed, framed ‘badly’ or under emphasised. This process drastically changed my relationship with the videos on the plasma screen and I began to experience them differently. Although superficially formulaic and repetitive, the way in which the videos were made was crucial, I realised, in creating a particular impression of the event. The wedding was to a great extent directed by the videographer who choreographed the day to ensure that the video came out well.



Stills from video footage made during apprenticeship with a Bengali videographer

During the summer of 2008, prepared by this experience in London, I went to Mexico and worked with two different videographers in San Francisco. Don Silvestre was particularly enthusiastic about my presence and welcomed me wholeheartedly as a member of his team, allowing me to operate his Panasonic

VHS camera and instructing me in detail on his ways of working. I sat with him in his studio and awaited the visits of those ‘godparents’ who had been appointed to pay for event videos. These ‘*padrinos de video*’, on whom I will elaborate more below, would initially visit the videographer to assess his availability on the day of the fiesta. They would let him know the time of the Mass and the nature of the fiesta (whether it was a baptism or a wedding, for example) and pay him half of his fee. Thus booked, the videographer would arrive at the appointed hour in the house of ‘*festejado*’ (celebrant) to video as she or he was dressed. He would proceed to record a full day and usually a long evening of celebration usually to fill a 90-minute tape, depending on the specifics of the deal he had made with the commissioning *padrino*. In the subsequent days he would await a slip of paper, usually delivered by the ‘*padrino de video*,’ detailing the full names of the family of the celebrant and his or her contributing godparents. This information would then be delivered, along with the resulting videotape, to the video editor.

I followed the videotapes to the house of the video editor Don Encarnación, where he allowed me to watch and later help as he digitised them into his computer in the corner of a studio in an outbuilding which he also used for printing advertising banners, posters and flyers. Flicking through the digitised tape, Encarnación would deftly remove very dark or wobbly sections where the videographer had been distracted or had failed to successfully line up all of the factors necessary for a clear shot. Having removed these sections there would be space to add several minutes of credits – names of the godparents – *padrinos* and *madrinas* – which would roll over the ubiquitous ‘*paisaje*’ (landscape) footage, stock images of rolling waves on tropical beaches and crystalline waterfalls, accompanied by a romantic instrumental or ballad.

Although these added elements are largely generic, the family or the *padrino* might occasionally make specific requests for a particular landscape or musical track. Since event videos are watched socially in both Mexico and the US, new editing techniques and graphics are quickly identified and requested. This tends to homogenise the style of event videos as trends pass from one innovative videographer or video editor to others who rapidly catch on as their clients ask for music and graphics in the latest trend. During my research for this project footage

of waterfalls was the most often repeated and the song ‘Angels’ was by far the most common. The evolution in the event video which results from these trends – which also demonstrates more subtle adaptations of shot style, camera movements and in-camera editing – is neatly demonstrated by comparing the 1990s event video I describe in the Introduction with the more recent videos I describe in Chapters 4 and 5. Whilst this evolution is significant in demonstrating the dynamic between the videographer and their public it is clear, as I outline in the Introduction and substantiate in Chapter 4, that these innovations work within certain parameters to create audiovisual assemblages with a consistent and recognisable relationship to lived places.

My experience with the videographers and editors over two months, accompanying Silvestre to at least one *fiesta* each weekend, increased my confidence and as I felt I was beginning to grasp what was required of me as a videographer, I began to accept some of the frequent requests which were made of me to independently shoot and edit event videos for friends and acquaintances. I made four event videos over the course of the summer – two at ceremonies for children graduating from various stages of education, one at a baptism and one at a birthday party. Making these videos alone was extremely difficult and stressful. The amount of poise required to edit the video in the camera, economising on tape and battery for a long day of filming, which would be neatly transferable to a 90 minute DVD covering all essential elements of the *fiesta*, was surprising and challenging. Even more challenging was the constant tension between my instinctive way of filming – influenced by my training at the Granada Centre – and what was expected of me as a videographer.

One of the event videos, which I recorded in mid July after six weeks of working with Silvestre, was particularly difficult. “In the *fiesta* I constantly faced the difficulty,” I wrote in my field work notes “of filming what is wanted and not what I think is beautiful or interesting – the two often conflict.” When I began to edit the tape, adding the opening landscape scenes and credits, I was horrified to find that I had recorded only 38 minutes of footage, nearly an hour less than the full Long Play mini DV tape, which would be expected. Preoccupied by looking for ‘good shots’ and not really sure what, or how, to video, I had summarily failed despite my

attempts to learn from Silvestre over the preceding weeks. Indeed the video was a disappointment to the family for whom I made it and I could only apologise and attempt to explain the difficulty of rendering the video in the way that they expected – “it’s not as easy as it looks – these videographers really know what they are doing!”

I became painfully aware that the style of shooting to which I had become accustomed was entirely dependent on the intervention of continuity editing to ‘work’. My training in filmmaking had been geared towards the production of observational film and, in keeping with the most commonly practiced version of this style, I was accustomed to framing activities from various angles and shot sizes, using contextualising longer shots to open scenes, which then cut between close-ups of hands and faces, for example, which would later be cut together. My disastrous video of the fiesta was fragmented and, in the context of the event video, meaningless. I had made short shots of things that caught my eye – close ups of people eating or children playing. I stopped recording while I moved the camera from one subject to another or from a wide shot to a closer one. The next time I went out with Silvestre, still slightly bruised from the humiliation of failure, I watched very carefully as he made long, smooth shots, which connected the guests at the party with distinctive features of the physical environment of San Francisco. As he handed me the camera I resisted my urge to constantly stop recording and began to emulate his tilts, pans and zooms.

This process of learning to make event videos gave me an embodied awareness of the relationship between the San Francisco I knew through my lived experience of being at a *fiesta* and the images and sounds of the event video as a filmic assemblage. My experience of failure emphasised the importance of the event video – not as a generic audiovisual document or indexical trace of that lived place but as a particular suite of images and sounds – a filmic re-construction. I became aware of the vital importance of the form of the event video – following the *fiesta* protagonists spatially through the streets of the town, and temporally through the day – but always emphasising the same crucial moments or ‘scenes’ and framing its subjects using characteristic shot styles and camera movements. As I became better at making event videos and got to grips with their essentially formulaic

relationship with lived experience – the tilt down from church tower to the waiting bride and groom, the slow pan of the camera to follow a *quinceañera* as she passes – I came to understand the significance of these formal devices as just as crucial as what was before the camera.

### Experiencing Event Videos with Migrants

This embodied sense of the filmic function of the event video was emphasised in my subsequent experiences of ‘real’ event videos (those made by videographers other than myself) as I moved between Mexico and the US on research trips between December 2008 and February 2009 and between February and April 2010. In January 2009, as I came in from the dark and biting cold of an evening blizzard to a tiny, warm ground floor flat just off Junction Boulevard in Queens, New York, I was greeted by the usual tense hubbub. In each of the two small bedrooms the television was blaring but no one was really watching. Both couples had finished their work for the day and Rigoberto was speaking to someone on the phone while Josefina, four months pregnant and tired after a long day in the kitchen at McDonalds, returned from letting me in to her former position tucked up under the covers. She yelled at three-year-old Alejandra, who, having removed her snow-wet trousers was now playing excitedly with her slightly older cousin and next-door neighbor in this cramped two-bedroom flat. The two girls ran between kitchen and bedroom across the small corridor, screeching at the top of their voices to compete with the two televisions, Rigoberto’s conversation and the customary greetings surrounding my arrival. Slamming the doors with gusto the girls’ excitement began to reach fever pitch. Losing her patience, Josefina also increased her volume, and as she shouted at Alejandra insisting that she calm down and stop slamming the door, sad wails and the beginning of a tantrum added to the cacophony.

As I took out the carefully closed package I had brought and put it on the bed, Alejandra stopped whimpering and trotted over to see what had been sent from Mexico. The tightly sealed bundle was attacked with a pair of scissors and out came a plastic bag of salted pumpkin seeds, which was eagerly torn open and the seeds distributed. Josefina’s mother had also sent a small bag of corn tortillas,

which was sniffed, fondled and put to one side to be warmed and eaten later. Josefina removed various herbal medicines and *'pomadas'* (balms) from the packaging, commenting with some satisfaction that this was exactly what she needed. The DVD *'Mis XV Años– Tatiana'* videoed some ten days earlier on a bright day in San Francisco remained in my bag; the video was intended for Tatiana's brother who lived close by, but who was still at work and had proved impossible to get hold of. When the excitement of the *'paquete'* subsided we began to chat a bit about San Francisco, Rigoberto and Josefina asked me how their seven-year-old son was doing, was he polite last time I saw him, and how were Josefina's mother and her brothers? *"You saw them at the fiesta right?"* An expectant silence... *"hey, couldn't we watch the film?"*

Josefina got up out of bed and carefully took the DVD from me, examining the cover with pleasure and carefully loading the disc in the player before settling back down under the covers. Alejandra sat herself down quietly and craned her neck up to see the screen. Hearing the music of the opening titles – Robbie Williams' *'Angels'*, sung in Spanish – Josefina's father came in from the kitchen and her brother from the other bedroom. Seeds were being munched and the bag passed around as the title sequence gave way to the opening shots of the video, fresh images and sounds from San Francisco. For the next 90 minutes the video was the centre of discussion and comment between those gathered – the focal point of a mini-*fiesta*. The *quinceañera's* dress was analysed in detail, as was the design of Don Juan's recently completed house – its merits and flaws. Comments were made on the surprising size of children and the health, weight and general condition of older people. When Rigoberto spotted his son at the mass he stopped the tape, winding back, frame by frame to see what he was wearing and how he looked.

These pauses to recognise and digitally emphasise individuals or places were repeated frequently and when, after half an hour and some frantic texting by Rigoberto, yet another couple arrived to watch the video, it was rewound so that they could see their parents sitting near the back of the church listening to the mass. The video progressed and Rigoberto went out for some beers. Comments got more and more bold and rowdy as the noise of the *fiesta* increased and the *cumbia* music that blasted from the massive walls of speakers into the cameras' tiny mic

became a fuzzy lilting rhythm punctuating the loud chatting and laughter in the room. When we got to the end of the video the girls were sleepy and it was late. Josefina got up and, ejecting the DVD, switched off the television. We dusted ourselves of pumpkin seed debris and cleared the beer bottles. Pulling on my boots and coat I said goodbye and followed the neighbours out into the cold New York night leaving a quiet and peaceful flat behind me.

Experiences such as this replicated many times over several months of fieldwork in New York and New Haven form the second stage of my ethnographic fieldwork for this project. This participation in the consumption of event videos was often a natural extension of participant observation as I spent time in migrant homes. Although I sometimes asked to see videos – a request almost always met with enthusiastic agreement – they were often playing when I arrived or begun without my prompting, in the background as we chatted. I made written notes reflecting on these viewings and I began to collect event video footage – placing my video camera on a tripod to frame the edge of the screen – a technique that also recorded the sound in the room. These viewing experiences emphasised the importance of the event video to migrant social life. Several migrants, when I asked if we could watch an event video together, admitted to watching at least some of their collection on a daily basis. It also became clear, over time, that the first viewing of a video, such as the one I have described above, where full attention was given to the video as the focus of activity, was very different from subsequent viewings, where the video was left to play in the background, chatted over and occasionally commented on. The mood of calm and well-being which the videos engendered, the particular atmosphere they created, was common to all viewings and, in the context of participant observation – through which I shared as much as possible in the migrants' lived experiences of noise and stress, the alienation of winter in the city – it was an atmosphere which I came to value and appreciate.

#### Making Video Messages – Contextualising the Event Video

These viewing experiences gave me an anecdotal impression of migrants' relationships with event videos, and a strong sense of the imagined processes implied in those relationships. In order to clarify and define this sense I needed to develop a more concrete understanding of the relationship between the form and

content of the event video and the particular reactions it engendered. Alongside my work making event videos with videographers and watching them with migrants, I conducted a video messaging project. By offering migrants and their families an opportunity to use video travelling between Mexico and the US for a different kind of communication – whose form and content was very different from that of the event video – I hoped to explore the possibilities for other ways video might work in the transnational community, thus creating a context for the consideration of the event video and its consumption.

This strategy was informed by fine art practice and in particular by the work of Emily Jacir in her project *Where We Come From*. In this photographic and archival project, displayed as a series of framed documents and images mounted on a wall, Jacir acted as an agent for various Palestinians living in the USA. She asked them: “If I could do something for you, anywhere in Palestine, that you yourselves are unable to do, what would it be?.” She did the things people had asked her to do for them; laying flowers on a grave for one person, for example and kissing the brother of another. She documented these acts, mostly using handwritten notes and photographs, which she then exhibited as an artwork (Bell, 2008).

Anthropologists and documentary makers have also engaged in video messaging, particularly between geographically divided members of the same community. Such projects have generally been conducted in the interests of creating or improving transnational community cohesion and of gathering information about the ways in which community members divided by a national border choose to represent themselves to one another. The collaboration between anthropologist Graeme Rodgers and filmmaker Andrea Spitz, who carried video messages across the South Africa – Mozambique border (Rodgers and Spitz, 2007), is an excellent example of this kind of work. Whilst my deployment of video messaging acknowledges and draws, to some extent, on such research, it is particularly inspired by Jacir’s emphasis on the knowledge and understanding which she developed through the process of mediating the relationship between distant people and places. I read her project not so much about sharing the information which she moved between the US and Palestine – details of the activities she was

asked to perform – as about her own physical performance of these acts as a profoundly involved way of learning about and understanding the lives of others. Similarly my intention in conducting the video messaging project was not primarily the gathering of information – the details of what people would say to one another. I saw this element of the research rather as a way of deepening my videographic involvement in the transnational community.

Intervening in the production and reception of ‘fresh’ filmic assemblages over which I had more control, would, I hoped, help me to recognise and define the form and the edges of the filmic places and selves enabled by consumption of San Francisco event videos. I visited several families in the village of San Francisco with whom I was friendly and explained my idea to them – I would use my video camera to record anything in San Francisco that they wanted to send to family or friends living in the New York area or which those family members wanted to see. The same process would be repeated in the US: migrants could choose to send any type of recording home from the USA and those in San Francisco had an opportunity to request specific footage of migrant relatives. DVDs of the footage I recorded, would be left with the migrants in New York and their family members in Mexico. I was soon overwhelmed by queries in the street and knocks on the door with requests to make videos. In the end I acted as video ‘go between’ for sixteen families and their migrant relatives.

Filming sessions were necessarily loose and improvised. In both Mexico and the US I almost always made an appointment to film in a specific place and time but often arrived to find people busily engaged in other activities. I always attempted to relinquish control of the video session – simply removing my camera from its bag and awaiting instructions, but I was often met with requests for direction – “where do you want us to stand? what shall we do?”. In the end, most of the video messages were made collaboratively as we discussed what to do and ultimately made it up as we went along, directing one another. Although I did not make a conscious decision about the videographic style of the video messages as I made them, they ultimately reflect my training in observational film and the tropes of documentary realism with which I am most familiar as a camera operator (see video appendices disc 1 for a small selection of video messages). The messages

often include a handheld ‘tour’ of a house or garden or sequences which use a combination of ‘establishing’ wide shots and close ups of detail to describe a place or object. The tripod is used as my collaborators address the camera to send *saludos* (greetings) and my voice is sometimes heard as we converse over the camera.



Still from video messaging project (video Appendix 1)

In Mexico most of the footage I recorded fell into three broad and overlapping categories – I was asked to film ‘*terrenos*’ (plots of land), houses (almost all in various stages of construction) and children. In several cases extended family gatherings were organised to coincide with my presence. On three occasions such gatherings were charged with emotion as the very elderly or terminally ill sent last message to their children or grandchildren in the US. In one house I was asked to film as a full *Mariachi* band played to a middle-aged mother literally on her deathbed. The children who had paid for the band remained on the end of telephone line, the receiver upturned on their mother’s dressing table, as they listened in New York.

In many households, children were pushed in front of the camera and pressed to talk “*Manda saludos a tu papa* (say hello to your dad)”. There was a lot of shuffling from foot to foot and uncomfortable shy mumbling as more and more

family members gathered around and behind me (out of shot) attempting to persuade blushing children to talk to their parents. Sometimes they obliged, simply repeating what they were being told to say. There were frequent examples of direct address to camera, which were always rather formal. In one house an older man read a pre-prepared message to his sons in New Haven from a piece of paper. In another a grandmother spoke directly to her grandson, sending detailed instructions on how to cook the beans, which I would be carrying to him in my luggage along with the video.

In the USA the camera was often co-opted in order to send testimony or proof. One man, whose family had sent a video of his nephews riding on a donkey, asked me to video at his work place, an up market Mexican restaurant in Manhattan. Another, who had recently been in a serious accident in a train and suffered debilitating nerve damage, asked me to simply video him wiggling his toes and walking in the park. As much as he had tried to convince his mother over the phone that he was fully recovered, she continued to worry about him and he wanted to put her mind at rest. In several cases migrants took a more definite role in directing me to create a specific video for them. In these cases the resulting videos often echoed the aesthetics of the San Francisco event video. A very young migrant called José shyly suggested we film outside and simply took me around his neighborhood in the Bronx. What emerged was a perverse twisting of the promenade around San Francisco ubiquitous in the opening scenes of the event video. Don Ochenta drove his *camionetta* to a spot on the estuary shore near New Haven where he spoke to the camera sending a nostalgic message to his sons in Mexico. “Work hard in school,” he told them “I hope you like this happy ending.”



Stills from video messaging project (video appendix 1)

Similarly Miguel (who I had filmed walking without his calipers to prove to his mother that he was, in fact, better) took me to a park near his house with a spectacular view of the Washington bridge and asked me to connect him to the bridge through the camera, a replication of the positioning of *fiesta* protagonists in relation to the lived places of the village, the church or the town hall.



Still from video messaging project (video appendix 1)

Through recording such messages I inevitably became bound up in family politics and power relations. The emotional complications and manipulations implied by transnational family life were often palpable. Although this aspect of the project was fascinating and the specific content of the many hours of video messages I made would, in and of itself, be the subject of an interesting research project there is not room for such an analysis here. My interest is rather to give a general impression of the way in which the video messages were created and consumed in order to provide a context for the consideration of event videos. The shuffling feet of shy children forced to speak for their mothers or aunts (sometimes directly asking for money), the angry face of a mother pointing out the damp walls in the empty house of her absent son and the attempts of migrants divert the camera away from their humble dwellings ring with tension and frustration and firmly underline the vital importance of the event video as a formulaic evasion of a messy reality.

The watching of these video messages took place in relative quiet: hushed comments were whispered between watchers with worried faces. On several occasions there were outpourings of sadness and nostalgia. José's cloud of nervousness condensed into shy tears as his grandmother explained her bean recipe. As we got to the end of the disc he apologised and played it again from the beginning, this time smiling his way through it and commenting on the state of her house and his grandmother "actually she is looking pretty good for her age". José, who had designed the video parade around his Bronx neighborhood, delayed watching the video his family had sent until we had returned from recording his own video message to them. It was his day off and we were alone in his shared flat. The video was intended for José and his father who slept on bunk beds in one of the two small bedrooms. It was quite a lengthy video since his mother had gathered the whole family together for a meal, the finest details of which she had asked me to record, and to send their individual greetings to him in direct addresses to camera. He watched through the video in silence and towards the end of the DVD he turned to me and said: "I really want to go back now, I've been thinking about it but I've definitely decided now I want to go back". He was visibly upset and began trying to phone his mother. He called her seven or eight times, letting the phone ring out, before he gave up.

Watching my contingently shot, functional video of the migrant houses of San Francisco frequently led to close scrutiny of what was being built, and often a sense of dissatisfaction. My video of Gabi and Augustín's nearly complete house was watched with tense attention paid to every detail. Augustín paused the video in several places to ask me details about the construction and finish of the house. He was not happy with the way the vaulted ceiling in one room had been constructed and thought some of the paint was the wrong colour. Gabi agreed: "*It should be that pinkish-white colour that I see in all the Jewish houses I clean around here.*" The discussion escalated and by the time the video had finished the couple had decided to further extend the newly completed downstairs living room, since in the video it seemed very small, and cut down the walnut tree in the yard (which I had focused on because I thought it was beautiful and something they would be pleased with) since it just seemed to "*get in the way*". I had watched other videos with Gabi and Augustín, who had the typical collection of six or seven birthday parties and

graduations on VHS and DVD. Several of the tapes and discs contained sections of footage showing the house at various stages of construction. With shaky but distinctly filmic tilts and pans the camera framed the house in the event video style. These videos did not seem to elicit the nitpicking response which my video had triggered.

There was a similar contrast between the way in which migrants received the unstructured videos I had made of their children and their responses to their children's appearances in event videos. My video messages of children often prompted a litany of criticism: children were not dressed properly, they should have had their hair combed, they should have been wearing the new shoes that were sent, they shouldn't have been playing in the dirt, they should have been doing their homework at that time of day and so on. These vocal attempts to demonstrate parental concern played no role in the festive consumption of the event video. Even where migrants' children received a cameo role in an event video, their face caressed briefly as the videographer's camera passed over a table of *fiesta* guests, their image, which often prompted the rewind and pause response described above, was a catalyst of favourable and proud comments on their health, behaviour and beauty. As I became familiar with these responses to the various videos I took between Mexico and the USA, I became more able to identify the specific filmic qualities of the event video, which worked to engender these positive responses.

Video messages both of children and of the built environment of San Francisco often prompted shocked reactions as migrants noted physical changes emblematic of the passing of time. Surprise about the age of parents was matched by horror at the change in road surfaces and the addition of new houses or shops. In response to a tape of the San Francisco streets, which a mother had requested I make for her son, a young migrant who had been living in New York for several years, he told me I must have the wrong person, that this was unequivocally not San Francisco. It was only after repeating and freeze framing footage of the church that he began to accept, with no small degree of horror, that we were, in fact, looking at images from his hometown. These responses again led me to reflect on the filmic qualities of the San Francisco event video (of which the young migrant in question had, no

doubt seen many over the years) and their role in presenting a different view of the village, one that minimised the sense of time passing. The video messages, and the responses they engendered in migrant viewers, emphasised the calm atmosphere generated by event videos. This contrast highlighted the importance of the filmic reconfiguration of the village carried out by the event video.

### Videographic Responses and Reflections

Whilst the video messaging project was a rich and productive element of my fieldwork, which provided an invaluable context for understanding the migrants' experience of event videos, I decided from the outset that I would not use the resulting footage in the body of my final video. This decision was important in attempting, both for myself and for my interlocutors, to make a clear distinction between the video messages and my earlier videographic activities in the community as a documentary filmmaker and event videographer. More importantly I felt that this decision was necessary in order to ensure confidence and trust, particularly with undocumented migrants who might have been wary of participating in a potentially exposing project.

I made it very clear from the start that the material I recorded during the video messaging project was exclusively for the family members between whom it was sent and that, whilst what I learnt through the project would contribute to my video and written work, the footage we made would be handed to the families for them to distribute (or not) as they saw fit. This privacy was crucial in ensuring the level of participation and trust which made the project so productive, enabling the findings I have described here. Whilst a small selection from some of the least sensitive video messages are published, by express permission of those who appear in them, in the audiovisual appendix to this thesis (see video appendix disc 1), most of the material that was made through the video messaging part of the project remains in the sole ownership and under the control of the migrant families for whom it was made.

Given this early decision to discount the video messaging project as directly generative of material for the final video piece, it was necessary to find a way to

obliquely express the findings of that project in less methodologically and ethically complicated video footage. In tandem with my other research strategies I developed the method of videographic response and reflection. I responded to my experiences of the creating and watching of video messages by making other video footage and sound recordings. In Mexico this footage took the form of the long static shots and ambient sound recordings which feature prominently in *900,000 Frames Between Us*. In the US these reflections were more diverse and included the video I made in migrant dwellings, the recordings I made of people working, visual and sound recordings of street scenes and public transport, as well as recordings of the unstructured conversations I had with migrants as we discussed the role of event videos in their lives. This practice of reflection provided a calming and cathartic way to recover from what were often traumatic exchanges as I made or watched video messages with migrants and their families. I also found this practice helpful in delineating and clarifying my understanding of the relationships between lived and filmic places in the transnational community.

#### Evocation and Feedback – Sharing ‘Found Footage’ Sequences

It is hard to materially quantify the results of the work I did in learning to be emplaced in relation to event videos like my interlocutors in both Mexico and the USA. Since the results are invisible and not based in language – my own responses to the event videos, the imagined place and self brought into being when I experience them – they are difficult to share and talk about. When I attempted to initiate conversations about event videos, the results were similar to those described by Jackson when he asked his informants about initiation rituals: “*this is what event videos are like*”, people would tell me, “*this is how we like them, they are beautiful, aren’t they?*” I used the sharing of experimental sequences, through which I materialised my own cine-mimetic relationships with event videos evoking a sense of the imagined places and selves that my experience of them brought into being, to bring these intangible and non-verbal experiences into my relationships with my interlocutors.

Since my fieldwork took place during several trips to both Mexico and the USA, with periods between them spent at home in London, I was able to use my later

trips in December 2008 and February 2010 to widely share the early results of my own video work. These sequences were essentially short clips of *900,000 Frames Between Us* as a work in progress. Inspired in part by the found footage works discussed in Chapter 2, they combined the footage I had recorded at event video screenings with images from video reflections made in both Mexico and the USA and sound recordings of the conversations I had had with migrants.

Sharing these clips allowed both for open discussions about our respective experience of the event videos and – perhaps more importantly – it allowed me to gauge the non-verbal responses to my work as we watched it together. The screening sessions confirmed my sense that I had begun to understand the way my research participants experienced the event video and had managed to evoke a filmic experience that they collectively recognised. There was a general sense of discomfort around the shots of people working. In New York, Don José wondered why I had not shown his face: “I am proud to be working,” he said “I’ve been on TV here with the union. Show my face.” In general, however, on both sides of the border there was tense fidgeting as the shots of migrants working played out, which relaxed once the event video footage was shown.

After watching a clip Estela specifically congratulated me on my use of the long dissolve to melt footage of her working in the Taco stand on Queens Boulevard into stock footage of the sunset sea: “*I really liked it, the way you used the film (pelicula) of the sea and everything. It’s really very beautiful what you’ve done, it makes me feel good.*” Oscar, who was now in his early 30s but had migrated as a teenager, attending high school and later university in New York, was short in his response to my clips. “*Yes, I think it’s good what you’ve done, it’s important because people from my town, we are always dreaming, always living in our minds. I hope that when migrants here and people back home watch this they recognise that, because it is not good.*” Whilst Oscar’s value judgement around the moral implications of living in the mind surprised me (and was not reflected in the responses of other interlocutors who saw the clips) I found his response heartening. He had recognised the atmosphere I had attempted to evoke in the video work as something that related to him and his community. The responses

and reactions of my interlocutors, both vocal and non-verbal, are reflected and expressed in *900,000 Frames Between Us* as it exists in its final form.

## Conclusions

Just as it is impossible for me to directly share in the lived places brought into being through the relationship of the body and mind of someone else with the material world around her, it is impossible for me to experience event videos as members of the San Francisco transnational community do. The ‘kinaesthetic learning’ facilitated by the participatory methods of sensory ethnography allows anthropologists an affinity with the lived bodies of those they are studying so that they might begin to feel similarly emplaced in relation to the material world and might, thus, come to understand the way in which those others experience, and imagine, the world around them. The video-based strategies I have outlined in this chapter aim to apply and adapt this process of kinaesthetic learning to an ethnographic study of the relationship between the lived experiences of migrants and their families in Mexico and the experiences of the imagined places and selves – the filmic place – that their relationships with event videos allow. In an attempt to align my own experience of the event video with that of my interlocutors, I have sought to develop an embodied understanding of its relationships to lived experience at both the point of production and the moment of consumption. By creating and watching event videos and video messages in the context of wider participation in the day-to-day life of the community, I have aimed to develop an affinity not only with the lived bodies of those around me but also with the imagined bodies brought into being as those videos are made and consumed.

Learning how to watch and create San Francisco event videos has enabled me to feel emplaced in relation to them in ways that emulate the experiences of those around me. Since the (imagined) places and selves that I have come to know through this process of ‘filmic emplacement’ are both invisible and inaccessible through language, the use of video sequences to evoke them has formed an indispensable part of my investigation. Sharing video sequences which filmically materialise my experience of event videos, and taking account of reactions to them, has enabled me to ‘check’ my own responses to event videos against those of my

interlocutors. This dynamic process of evoking and exploring the filmic places and selves brought into being through the creation and consumption of the San Francisco event video is elaborated in Chapter 5, where I describe the resulting video piece *900,000 Frames Between Us*, and its attempt to make this experience of filmic emplacement accessible to those outside of the San Francisco community.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SAN FRANCISCO FILMIC PLACE

“They say we are in New York, but really we live as if we were locked up because day after day it’s the same thing”

Gabriela in *900,000 Frames Between Us* (2011)

“Our pubs and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our factories and railway stations seemed desperately imprisoning. Then film came along and exploded all these dungeons with the dynamite of its tenths of a second, leaving us free, now, to undertake adventurous journeys amid their widely scattered ruins”

Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2008 [1936]:29)

#### Introduction

The video-based ethnography described in Chapter 3 profoundly changed my relationship with San Francisco event videos. As I became a more experienced participant in – and producer and spectator of – event videos, the experience of myself-as-other that they allowed me came to emulate that of my research participants. Becoming filmically emplaced similarly to my interlocutors brought me nearer to an understanding of the imagined places and selves brought into being through their interactions with event videos. In this chapter I will provide a text-based description of those imagined places and selves and their relationships to other lived and mediated experiences of the San Francisco community. San Francisco event videos, I propose, allow experiences of the imagined selves already brought into being through experiences of mass media. The event video functions to uncouple the lived place of the village from the filmic place it creates and discourages the migrant viewer from going beyond the screen to make sense of the images and sounds which it presents. The performative nature of the *fiesta* and the devices used by videographers to filmically reconstruct the village, resonate with the filmic assemblages of popular cinema and television. In Mexico, *fiesta*

protagonists and their guests incarnate the imagined bodies brought into being through their relationship with television. In the USA, event videos evoke memories of mediated rather than lived experiences. The virtual world which event videos create – an imagined place created and shared collectively by geographically distant members of the transnational community – can be thought of as a ‘filmic home’. This ‘home’, which is constantly regenerated as videos are produced and consumed, is resistant to the passing of time, and to the physical ruptures which characterise the transnational community. This filmic place enables the forging and maintenance of social relationships over time and space in circumstances that might otherwise make such bonds impossible.

### Setting the Scene

Let’s return to Josefina and Rigoberto’s cramped Queens apartment. Josefina has taken the disc out of its ornate packaging and it retracts into the DVD player as she takes her place on the bed beside me. Colour bars fill the screen for a few seconds, brilliantly heralding what is to come. They give way to a grey countdown leader, which begins at eight and beeps its way down to two before the screen goes black for a split second. The strong chord which starts the music is coupled with what looks like an out of focus close-up of gently undulating fake fur, a computer-generated graphic, which is over-laid by shimmering white sparkles of digital glitter. The name of the photo studio responsible for the making of the video spins out from the centre of the frame ‘*Video Filmaciones Garza*’. The fake fur is replaced by a flat graphic image – a blue screen on which floating hearts and bubbles appear. The screen turns pink, ambiguous fuzzy movement coming into focus as roses and petals. Over these flowers, which move in slow ripples, appear titles in ornate script, which arrive on and leave the screen through the magical tap of an animated magic wand: “*Mi XV Aniversario*” (my fifteenth birthday), and then the name of the birthday girl “*Tatiana*”, which is regaled with an animated crown. The next shot I see is a static image of clouds in a bright blue evening sky onto which the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Jesus on the cross have been superimposed. I move through water splashing and trickling, which pulls out to reveal a spectacular waterfall over which appears the title “*Papas*” with the names of Tatiana’s parents.



Stills from *Tatiana Mis XV Años*

This sequence takes me from the splashing waterfall to the seashore, where I watch the water gently rise and fall on soft, sun-kissed rocks and experience the detail of the fleshy green plants that grow amongst them. Waves lap on a shingle beach. I float very slowly under a tropical sea, surrounded by tiny orange fish, which move as a school around me and then, in close up, cavort in the drifting fingers of a clump of seaweed. I look up at two dolphins that slide past each other right at the limit of the sea's surface and eventually I emerge to look down as the dolphins' skin kisses the surface of the water, moving me into a wide orange sunset on a calm broad sea. A palm frond is silhouetted on the right as I move closer to the sun and as it sets I return to the cloudy sky, where I am reunited with the images of Jesus and the Virgin of Guadalupe. A long dissolve gradually replaces this blue sky with another, less cloudy blue and the image of an orange and yellow painted church, a snow-capped mountain behind it and Jesus, arms outstretched, hovering in the sky above. I have arrived in the San Francisco of the event video.

#### Within the Screen's Boundaries – The Event Video as Fiction

Like the first moments of many TV programmes and films, the sounds and images of this opening sequence work to create a strong relationship with my body and mind. In the very first shots of the video '*Tatiana, Mis XV Años*', the out of focus ambiguity and deep texture of the gently moving images "invite a look which moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realises what he or she is beholding" (Marks, 2000:163). This wondering caress on the surface of the image engages my body's sense of touch, what Marks has described as 'haptic visuality'. Because the images are difficult to make sense of through the optical information which is offered, I appeal to embodied knowledge, engaging the body in a type of seeing which calls on sense memories. This engaging of

memory in making sense of the images presented pulls me into a cine-mimetic relationship with the video. I am forced into my own body and mind to make sense of the fuzzy images of petals and the digital spangle of glittery graphics. As my body and mind engage with the audiovisual assemblage before me, I experience a place and a self brought into being through that relationship. The place I experience, as I see and hear the trickling water of the waterfalls and the dolphins that touch against one another as their skin kisses the surface of the water, is not related to my memories of the lived place of the village I am about to see. My cine-mimetic response to the event video does not carry me from Josefina's bed 'back' through time or 'down' through space to the San Francisco I know through lived experience. My relationship with this opening scene works to create a filmic place whose relation to the lived place of San Francisco is convoluted and obscured.



Still from *Tatiana, Mis XV Años*

Vivian Sobchack, in her chapter *Towards a Phenomenology of Non-fiction Film Experience* (1999), describes the way in which our relationships with moving images vary according to our knowledge of the subject matter depicted. Her analytical framework, which draws on the 1960s writing of French film theorist Jean-Pierre Meunier, proposes three distinct modes of spectatorial consciousness that correspond to our consumption of various media types: home-movies, documentaries and fiction films (p.243). These modes, argues Sobchack, constitute

a spectrum in terms of the extent to which viewers' experience of the media depends upon what is shown on the screen and the extent to which that experience is differentiated from her lived experience of the world. Home movies, described by Meunier and Sobchack as 'film souvenirs', show us images of people and places we know through lived experience, acting as mnemonic devices "through which the viewer evokes and identifies, not with the mimetic image, but with an absent person or past event" (p.247). As we watch home movie footage we engage our memories of far away people and past events, calling up in our minds, individuals and situations which are elsewhere in space and time (p.244). Our experience of the fiction film, where we have no lived knowledge of the people and the places represented on screen, is radically different. Rather than functioning as mnemonic devices that engage our memories of specific lived experience, connecting us with people and places we have known, fiction films engage memory in the constitution of a more discrete and screen-dependent cinematic realm;

"in fictional consciousness, the cinematic object is perceived as 'irreal' or 'imaginary' rather than 'absent' or 'elsewhere. Unlike our experiences of the home movie or the documentary, the images of fiction are experienced as directly given to us, and they exist not 'elsewhere' but 'here' in the virtual world, that is 'there' before us ... the more dependent we are on the screen for specific knowledge of what we see in the film experience the less likely we are to see beyond the screen's boundaries and back into our own world" (p243)

It is important to make clear that this attitudinal bias towards images, which we consume as fiction, does not decrease the extent to which we enter into an embodied relationship with them. We make sense of fictional moving images through new constellations of memories of both lived and mediated experiences which lead to our experience of a screen-bound 'virtual world'. Sobchack argues that our experience of this world garners a more intense embodied experience of screen objects than that brought about through other modes of viewing. Where depicted people and places extend spatially and temporally beyond the screen and into the lived experience of the viewer, she writes, the impact of her cinematic experience will be the lesser because of her embodied knowledge of them (p.245).

When we experience a film or video in the fiction mode, then, we pay more attention, and become more deeply involved (p.250). The mode in which a viewer relates to particular audiovisual assemblage is less dependent upon the intention with which that media was made (whether it is defined by its maker as a documentary, a fiction or a home movie) and more upon the way in which that which is depicted corresponds with her lived experience.

This analytical framework is useful in thinking through the migrant use of event videos and their role in the social life of the transnational community. In contrast to the 'conventional' Euro-American engagements with home movies as mnemonic devices characterised by Sobchack, event videos have a less direct connection with migrant viewers' memories of lived experience. Migrant parents are necessarily more screen dependent, in their consumption of event videos of children they have not seen for several years, than is Sobchack in her consumption of home movie of her son. For Sobchack, the home movie recalls the lived body of her son and their shared places of lived experience. "I know more of him," she writes "than the images show me. I don't have to work at comprehending them." (p.251). For many migrants, event videos are their most coherent and complete way of 'knowing' distant family members. Migrants lack recent lived experience of those they see and hear, they do not 'know more' of those depicted. Whilst migrant viewers might call on memories of pre-migration lived experiences in comprehending images sent from home, this work of association is difficult and potentially traumatic.

Sobchack describes the nostalgia often triggered as we watch the home movies we identify as 'film souvenirs'. "Watching our own home movies," she writes "our intentional objective is to rejoin the real event or person with our real selves 'elsewhere' and in other times" (p.248). Since this 'rejoining' is impossible, she argues, its attempt often leads to a hollow feeling of 'empty sympathy'. The emotionally charged responses to the video messaging project, which I describe in Chapter 3, suggest just such a sense of frustration as migrants and their relatives engaged with the videos messages I brought them, attempting to rejoin the experience of the images they watched with their lived memories of distant relatives. The videos we made engendered a strong sense of loss particularly in migrant viewers, a sense of a time and a place irretrievably distant. The

expressions of disbelief “*My son can’t be that big*” and horror “*Oh my god, are they my parents?... But they look so old*” and the raw grief which was often tangible as migrants and their families watched the videos we had made, suggest the importance of the event video in bypassing this sense of loss by creating an ever present and largely unchanging, fictional place.

By creating an atemporal virtual world, which is detached from the lived place of the village, event videos provide a ‘safe place’ within which familial and social relationships can be forged and maintained. By deploying stylistic devices to construct filmic assemblages with specific and coherent characteristics, event videos ensure their images are experienced not as traces of ‘elsewhere’ but, to return to Sobchack’s words, “here in the virtual world, that is, ‘there’ before us” (1999:243). By encouraging a screen-bound experience of a coherent virtual world, event videos undermine the need for migrants to reach beyond the boundaries of the screen into their own fragmented lived experience. The title sequence of Tatiana’s video embodies and demonstrates this ‘fictionalising’ impulse. The colour bars and countdown leader are evocative of fictional cinema: the abstract graphics are resonant of fantasy. Perhaps most importantly, the stock footage of dolphins and whales, seaweed and sun-kissed beaches, takes us far away from the landlocked lived experiences of San Francisco to other places not known through lived experiences. These scenes are experienced by the migrant viewer as given through the screen, not ‘really’ existing elsewhere but constituting, and being constituted by, their presence ‘here’ before her in the virtual world of the event video. Videographic interventions bring the migrant’s experience of their own village into this same virtual world. The presence of Jesus hovering in the sky above the church and the ornate script which overlays the image ensures that the San Francisco to which we arrive in the event video does not and cannot stretch beyond the screen.

This virtual world, the fictional ‘here before us’ evoked by the event video, is not a general fictional space but a coherent virtual place with strong connections to other mediated experiences. This filmic place, brought into being through the creation and consumption of event videos, is closely associated with the imagined places and selves generated through the consumption of mass media, and

particularly through relationships with the filmic assemblages of television. Both the pro-filmic performance of the *fiesta* and the filmic re-constructions of the village through the videographers' use of camera styles and video editing echo the global aesthetics of glamour and opulence of much of the television consumed in the transnational community. To make clear the importance of the imagined places and selves brought into being through relationships with television as a context for understanding the filmic place of the event video it is useful to look, in some detail, at the similarities between the aesthetics of the event video and those of popular television. In order to make this comparison manageable and meaningful I have restricted my analysis to a consideration of two popular *telenovela* (soap opera) series.

*Telenovelas* are an important element of life in the transnational community. Widely watched series, which run hour-long programmes daily over several months on Mexican television, are repeated only a few months later in the US. During my research period two *telenovelas*, which screened at prime time (9-10pm) on one of the major channels (*Televisa – La Canal de las Estrellas*) in Mexico and the major Latino channel (*Univision*) in the US, were the most watched and talked about amongst those participating in my research. *Fuego en la Sangre* (Fire in the Blood) (2008) ran in Mexico between January and November 2008, and in the US between April 2008 and February 2009. *Corazon Salvaje* (Savage Heart) (2009) ran in the same time slot and on the same channels from October 2009 to April 2010 in Mexico and from February to August, 2010 in the US. Both series were executive produced by Salvador Mejía Alejandre and used many of the same actors. Both are adaptations of historical fiction novels, set in Mexico and richly bejeweled with raunchy romances, illegitimate children, husband-poisoning, gold-digging wives, witches and corrupt priests. Screened during the evenings when work, for most, was over for the day, houses (in Mexico) and flats (in the USA) were full and the TV was on, these programmes frequently bubbled away in the background as I visited my research participants.

The ethnography of soap opera spectatorship as an aspect of everyday life is a discourse which has been well developed in anthropology (Ang, 1985, Das, 1995, Miller, 1992, Abu-Lughod, 2002). These anthropological studies of soap opera

spectatorship have generally been based on extended shared viewing of programmes augmented by semi-structured interviews and surveys. The resulting written ethnographies tend to emphasise analysis of narrative structure and the use of specific imagery. There is a consistent interest, across all of these ethnographies, in the role of the soap opera as a global form, almost always produced ‘somewhere else’, on the local communities where it is consumed. Consistently, ethnographers have emphasised the complexities of the ways in which these mass-produced images are consumed in various cultural contexts, functioning neither as portals for utopian escapism or “visual valium that stupefies its audience in the interest of a dominant will” (Miller, 1992:178).

Unsurprisingly, the mass-produced images and sounds of soap opera are taken up differently wherever they are consumed, becoming enmeshed in complex ways with the lived experiences of those who consume them. Unpicking these connections to understand the intricacies of *telenovela* spectatorship in the San Francisco transnational community would be the work of another research project and I do not intend to provide such an analysis here. My interest is, rather, to demonstrate that event videos co-opt the global aesthetics of popular television, its generic images and sounds of wealth and glamour, building on a particular experience of self-as-other to create a coherent fictional place ‘between’ Mexico and the US. Since the viewing of *Fuego en la Sangre* and *Corazon Salvaje* presented itself as a prominent aspect of everyday life during fieldwork, I use the filmic assemblages proffered by particular scenes from these programmes as concrete examples of this widespread audiovisual style.

The opening credit sequence of *Corazon Salvaje* is a dense and rapid montage of shots from the series intercut with special effects and slick graphics and set over the romantic anthem *Mi Enamorado de Ti* by Puerto Rican pop singer Chayanne. Periodically we return to sweeping aerial views of a rocky coastline, we hover over white-capped breakers, occasionally roving inland to pass over rolling green fields. These aerial shots, which are also repeated within the body of each episode as pacing devices, are important constituents of the screen-bound virtual world, within which we meet the characters and experience the goings on of a pseudo-historic Veracruz. The spectacular flying shots have a strong resonance with the

stock footage with which event videographers preface and close video recordings of *fiestas*. The scene which closes the video ‘*Nuestra Boda – Toña y Alfonso*’ is uncannily similar in both style and content, the smooth movement over the choppy sea and craggy coastline similarly overlaid with the ornate script of the closing credits.



Still from  
*Corazon Salvaje* (Mexico, 2009)



Still from  
*Nuestra Boda – Toña y Alfonso* (2007)

My learnt experience of the event video enables me not only to recognise this connection but also to live it through my consumption of event videos. As I watch the opening sequence of *Tatiana, Mis XV Años*, the memories I deploy in making sense of it are not only memories of my lived experience of a Mexican village but memories of the imagined places that have been brought into being through my experiences of the *telenovela*. At the risk of pushing the point, the research described in Chapter 3 seems to offer reasonable grounds to suggest that the experience of Josefina, who sits beside me on the bed as we watch Tatiana’s video, might echo my own. The wide-open shot of the sun setting over a shimmering sea does not evoke sensory memories of the smell of salty air or of the feeling of bare feet on sand, but the memory of the engagement of these senses through the cinematic experience of the *telenovela* sea. A memory from the virtual, screen-bound world of the *telenovela*. As Josefina experiences the images of her son, contextualised within this filmic assemblage, she makes sense of them ‘as fiction’ through a recombination of memories of both lived and mediated experiences.



Still from  
*Tatiana – Mis XV Años* (2009)



Still from  
*Corazon Salvaje* (Mexico 2009)

### Performing Mimetic Selves

As I discovered in my work as an event videographer, many aspects of the *fiesta* are delicately orchestrated performances that contribute to the creation of a satisfactory video. The *fiesta* is a cinematic construction that allows a space for the performance of glamour and opulence, the incarnation of imagined selves brought into being through relationships with mass mediated images of luxury and wealth. The event video almost always begins with scenes of the protagonist of the *fiesta* (the *festejada* or *festejado*) removing their everyday clothes and being clothed in the gown or costume of the *fiesta*, clothes which often resonate with the lavish pseudo-historical garb of popular television such as the *telenovelas* I have described.

Following the title sequence of the video *Fernando – Mis Tres Años* the first image we see is of the face of a small boy dressed in a black *mariachi* costume. A pan out reveals this to be a printed image, part of a heart-shaped plastic decoration, which hangs above the front door of a grey, breeze block house. We see Fernando standing against the wall of the house, dressed in jeans and a shirt, coyly smiling at the camera. A second shot of the child shows him outside in the yard, surrounded by tables and busy preparations for the *fiesta*. Fernando punches at the camera and turns away shyly. We now see him lying on a bed surrounded by women. He is dressed in only his underwear now and the women proceed to clothe him in a toy soldier costume: a navy blue jacket, fringed with gold and with shiny brass buttons, a tall hat and a tiny plastic sword which points downwards from a leather

scabbard. The camera runs almost continuously for several minutes, zooming in and out to pick up details from the scene, the doing up of buttons, Fernando's smiles and laughter.

When he is dressed his grandmother arrives, adding the finishing touch of a gold necklace, a gesture framed in mid shot before we zoom in on the shiny medallion that hangs from it. One of his 'dressers' (probably his *madrina* or godmother) realises, at this point, that part of his costume has come loose and takes a moment to stitch it with a needle and thread before we see them walking out under the plastic heart decoration to start the procession to church. Fernando stands straight and neat, holding hands with his *madrina*, and without being prompted to do so they stop a few steps outside the house, an entourage of smartly dressed children and adults behind them, before commencing their steady walk through the town. The 'getting dressed' scene, which for little girls usually involves the donning of the bodiced and wide skirted dresses characteristic of *fiesta* garb, is almost always the first scene of the event video, following directly on from the title sequence. The creation of this scene documents, but more importantly catalyses, the transformation of the *fiesta* protagonist, and their entourage, from their everyday selves to their roles in the event video. It establishes the cast of characters we will interact with throughout the course of the video.

The transformation of the *fiesta's* protagonist into a choreographed character is strongly demonstrated throughout event videos but emphasised in particular semi-narrative 'scenes', which are staged and timed for the camera. Every *fiesta* and, therefore, every event video features at least one – and sometimes two or three – enormous multi-tiered cakes, which are incorporated into the day (and the video) through the ritualised *mordida* ('first bite') as the *festejado* is encouraged to bite directly from the uncut cake. In the tape *Viridiana, Mis Tres Años*, the *mordida* scene provides a perfect cinematic encapsulation of the cake and its function as her biting and cutting of the cake is framed by smooth pans and zooms between her small frame and the enormous confection. This scene transforms Viridiana from the slightly tired three-year-old that she inevitably was in the lived experience of that moment into the ideal of the affluent child, dressed in fur and satin,

complying with her social duty, existing forever in the filmic place brought into being by the event video.

The strongest example of the choreographed scene for the camera is the *vals* (waltz), which forms the spectacular climax to the fifteenth birthday celebrations for girls. In the tape *Tatiana, Mis Quince Años*, Tatiana's *vals* begins with the '*entrada*'. As a piece of romantic music is blasted out at high volume on the PA, we see Tatiana, framed in mid shot, make her way from the edge of the gathered crowd and into the centre of a large area of cleared dance floor, flanked by her '*chambelanes*' (chaperones), six young men dressed in tuxedos. As they take to the dance floor and begin the dance steps through which Tatiana is 'presented' by the *chambelanes* to the four edges of the dance floor, we follow them, the videographer smoothly gliding along the edge of the crowd, almost part of the dance. The music changes and the shot stabilises, to take a fixed perspective at one end of the dance floor. What follows are described as the '*actos cívicos*' or civic acts, of the *quinceañera* celebration – a sequence of choreographed rituals, which are woven together into a dance sequence. A small girl brings a doll onto the dance floor and Tatiana dances with them before a slow and balletic wave goodbye as the little girl melts back into the crowd. Tatiana gives her mother a large bunch of flowers, stepping forward to do so in time to music through which two of her *chambelanes* whirl her.

The final crowning and the dancing of a *vals* are the cinematic climax of the *fiesta* and the video. As Tatiana sits on a chair, produced for her from the sidelines, the camera moves closer and we see her face as the ladies around her place a sparkling diamanté tiara on her head. We see a tighter close up of its glistening surface as it is pinned firmly into her hair. Her shoes are changed, ordinary cloth sandals replaced with sparkling high heels. Having received her crown, the *quinceañera* stands and begins her *vals* and the camera zooms out, framing, once again, the dance floor around which Tatiana and her *chambelanes* swirl in time to the sweeping romantic strings. The *vals* ends as she takes her place in the middle of a ribbon in the formation of a five-point star, held at the corners by the *chambelanes*. The camera zooms in, isolating her in the centre of the screen, the corners of the star touching its edges. In this scene, Tatiana and her *chambelanes*

enact cinematic representations of womanhood and affluence, sophistication and romance and make them their own. The presence of the camera is a vital element of this performance, which is spatially organised to respect both the camera's location and the limits of the area it can record. All of the most important elements of the scene take place facing the camera, right in the centre of the dance floor and the whole dance is organised within the bounds of a 4:3 frame at middle distance. Tatiana regularly looks directly towards the camera, very aware of its presence and as the *chambelanes* make the pink star formation they do the same, setting their faces in steely heroic gazes right down the barrel of the lens.

Although less dramatic, the transformation of the *fiesta* guests, who largely function as 'extras' in the cinematic performance which constitutes the event video, is no less significant. The invitees of *fiestas* appear on the sidelines throughout event videos as they accompany the protagonist and his or her family through the events of the day. Dressed in their best, and often performing important social and cultural functions in the *fiesta*, some of which I will discuss in more detail below, they play an important function in creating a filmic assemblage of images and sounds which contextualises the *fiesta* protagonist. They too are transformed as they enact cinematic versions of themselves, incarnating the imagined bodies and selves brought into being through their relationships with moving image media (including other event videos).

There are specific and obligatory shots in the event video in which the guests' role in enacting and embodying their own cinematic bodies is particularly key. During the '*misa*' (mass) scene at the church, usually whilst the *fiesta*'s protagonist and their family is receiving communion, the videographer walks around the church slowly, sidestepping gently, his shoulder-mounted camera pointing downwards. As video viewers we drift over the friends and family assembled in the pews. Whilst small children occasionally wave for the camera, in general it is studiously ignored. Faces look towards the ceiling in prayer, or towards the front of the church in quiet contemplation. The congregation acts itself into the cinematic space of the event video. Similar shots show the eating of the meal at the *fiesta*, where the videographer moves from table to table, lingering long enough to catch the faces of contented guests and the raucous laughter as more and more tequila is consumed.

Whilst everyone is very aware of the camera, even the drunkest guests tend not to address it directly, respecting the importance of the magic that is being woven through this subtle performance.

#### The Resonance of Imagined Selves – The Video Style

The style of the event video – its cinematic re-constructions of the lived places of the village – package these cinematic performances, enclosing them in the virtual world of the fictional here and now. By using particular videographic techniques to create a filmic assemblage that resonates with the moving images of mass media, event videos elevate the audiovisual traces of the lived place of San Francisco, making them resonate with the memories of imagined rather than lived selves. In *Magaly – Mis XV Años*, the Mass is begun with a full frame image of clouds moving across a blue sky. The camera tilts down to perfectly frame Magaly and her parents and godparents being splashed with holy water at the door of the church. Cut to a close-up on the communion chalice, brightly reflecting the colours around it. The camera pulls out, expanding the frame to settle on the *quinceañera*, and her entourage, as they kneel at the altar listening to the mass. We zoom towards the *festejada*, resting on her face in close-up. Next the frame is filled with the gold patterns and brightly painted figures of the church's vaulted ceiling. The patterns swirl as the camera twists and zooms simultaneously, moving upwards into the detailed guiltwork before spiralling the other way out, back to a wide shot of the ceiling and a tilt down to the congregation.

Like the utopian seascapes that open the video, the videographic techniques deployed in this scene contribute to a filmic assemblage that encourages the San Francisco viewer to engage with it through a fictional mode of spectatorship. The specific style of the camera work functions to obscure the relationship between the lived place of the San Francisco church and the imagined place that the consumption of its images might bring into being. As it emulates the filmic constructions of space and time characteristic of popular television, this scene uses the video camera to create an audiovisual experience that offers the possibility of an alternative place of belonging for the transnational community. Both *Fuego en la Sangre* and *Corazon Salvaje* (perhaps unsurprisingly) end their 135 episode

runs with huge romantic weddings. The 'boda' scene that ends the final episode of *Fuego en la Sangre* begins with a shot of an ornate church ceiling decorated with gold paint. The camera tilts down to show three brides and three grooms (it is a triple wedding for reasons too complicated to explain here) from above, as they walk down the aisle towards the altar. We join them there, gliding along the flower arrangements that line their path as they walk towards the camera. As the priest welcomes them, the camera moves around a flickering candle, set in a shiny gold candlestick, and towards one of the happy couples who gaze at one another. When the service is over we cut to a close-up on green leaves, glistening in bright sunshine and gently moving in a soft breeze. The camera drifts out and down to reveal a country lane, which cuts through the middle of the shot. At its vanishing point on the edge of the frame and gradually through the image's centre a horse and cart carries the happy couples towards us.

The *misa* scene from *Magaly – Mis XV Años* resembles this generic televisual scene of romance and wealth. The shots selected by the videographer, and the way he moves his camera between his subjects, smoothly zooming and tilting, resonates with the filmic construction of the wedding in the *telenovela*. This videographic transformation completes the performance of those in the church, as they are transformed into figures in the virtual world the video evokes. For the migrant viewer these videographic devices are vital to ensure she experiences not the distant lived place of the church somewhere else or long ago, but the filmic space of a fictionalised church here and now – a fictionalised church which is familiar to her from her cine-mimetic interactions with the sounds and images of popular television.

The resonance between event video and popular television is further augmented in post-production through the use of extremely long transitions and dissolves and the superimposition of images. In the *telenovela*, long transitions are used to smooth the cuts between scenes and to superimpose images to create a rich assemblage both symbolically and sensorially. In the final scene of *Corazon Salvaje*, for example, an image of white doves, which we have been shown in a previous shot roosting in the church roof, is superimposed onto an image of the bride and groom as they nestle close to one another. In event videos edits regularly

include long transitions, dissolves are commonly deployed – the street melts into the church and the *misa* scene melts into the *fiesta* as guests tuck into their food. Transitions sometimes involve the combination of images through ‘screen wipes’. In *Mi Bautizo*, for example, lavish images of an ornate church give way to footage of the *festejado* as a heart shaped rupture at the centre of the screen grows and his baptism mass begins.



Still from *Corazon Salvaje*' (Mexico 2009)



Still from *Mi Bautizo* (2007)

### The Filmic Home

My research suggests that these stylistic devices, and the filmic assemblages to which they contribute, play a vital role in creating a culturally specific filmic place, brought into being as event videos are created and consumed – a filmic home. In *There's No Place like Home Video* (2002) James Moran describes the role of Euro-American event videographers as they appropriate the style of ‘home video’ to create a filmic assemblage which functions to cement family bonds, contributing to the phenomenological reality of the ‘photographic home’. Families use home video, Moran argues, as one aspect of the productive and reproductive work they do in creating a place of identity and security (p.61). Professional event videographers, who are commissioned to record special occasions, contribute to this place through their deployment of the ‘home video’ aesthetic. By using the style of home video – an intimate recognition of family connections and a contingent recording of improvised pro-filmic moments – event videographers “mimic the amateurs’ ideological perspectives with supposedly expert techniques” (p. 89). By

appropriating home video's "referential aesthetic that emphasises recognition of appropriate faces at just the right moments" (p. 89), Euro-American event videographers play an important part in creating audiovisual assemblages that are generative of spaces within which families create and experience the homes they need. The work San Francisco event videographers contributes to the production and reproduction of a very different place of belonging, a filmic home that is particular to the culture, the lived experiences and the filmic imagination of the community in which they work. Whereas the Euro-American event videographer mimics the videos made by 'Uncle Charlie' to create filmic assemblages which facilitate the experience of a place of belonging for the nuclear family (Moran 2002:86), the San Francisco event videographer appropriates the aesthetics of popular television to produce and reproduce a space within which the complex social structures of the village can be maintained despite the dispersal of its population in space and time.

The San Francisco *fiesta* is centrally important in assigning the roles on which the social structure of the community is based. *Fiestas* are vital as occasions at which young people are presented first as dependant family members and later as full members of society. Perhaps most importantly, it is through the organisation and realisation of *fiestas* that the fictive kinship relationships of '*compadrazgo*' (co-parenting) are made and confirmed. The *compadrazgo* system, which is similar to that found in much of Central and South America, is thought to be a syncretic tradition, emerging from a variety of Pre-Hispanic and Spanish Catholic elements (Nutini and Bell, 1980:13). At the celebration of significant sacred and secular rites of passage – baptism, first communion, marriage, *tres años*, *quince años* (for girls) and graduation from school amongst many others – the family of the *festejado* invites the participation of other members of the community who act as *padrinos* (godparents) (Nutini, 1984).

The relationships of *compadrazgo* thus established between families are vital to the socio-economic and political structure of the town. Historically this system operated through a modest exchange of goods between *compadres* (co-parents) whose ritual exchange of a *chiquihuite* (food basket) and attendance at mass together cemented their relationship of fictive kinship (Nutini and Bell, 1980).

With the massive increase in cash economy brought about by the influx of industrial labour and increasing migration to the USA, the augmentation in the number and size of *fiestas* has led to a more expansive and economically significant system of *compadrazgo*. Currently the celebration of a *quince años* or wedding in San Francisco might involve up to thirty different *padrinos*. In preparation for the *fiesta*, *padrinos* (godfathers) and *madrinas* (godmothers) are chosen and assigned to pay for and organise everything from soft drinks to hiring bands, including the creation of the event video, which is entrusted to the *Madrina or Padrino de Video* (video godmother or godfather). Many of these *compadrazgo* relationships are inevitably forged transnationally. Migrant parents are often absent at the *fiestas* of their own children, and godparents are often chosen precisely because their migrant status means that they have significantly more money to contribute.

The event video plays a vital role in creating an imagined place – a filmic home – for the development and expression of these kinship and fictive kinship relationships as they play out in the transnational community. Just as the inclusion of ‘the family’ in the audiovisual assemblage of the home video described by Moran facilitates the experience of a place of belonging that the family needs, so the event video deploys its particular style in creating a space for the social relations of San Francisco. The importance of these relations is clear from the very outset of the video, as the names of *padrinos*, rendered in ornate script, roll up the screen over the images of dolphins or waterfalls. All of the *padrinos* are listed, one by one, in a credit sequence that publicly acknowledges their contribution to the *fiesta*, and their new relationship of *compadrazgo*. This sequence also has the effect of sharing the opportunity for cinematic re-construction, with migrant *padrinos* and *madrinas* who could not be at the *fiesta*. They too are event video ‘stars’.

This acknowledgement and elevation of the relationships of *compadrazgo* is reiterated by the amount of time and attention that the video gives over to the ritual exchange of gifts between the family of the *festajada* or *festejado*, and his or her *padrinos*. These scenes, which are the official expression of a more wide-ranging economic exchange, involve the mutual ‘*entrega*’ (handing over) of gifts of

food baskets, live turkeys and flowers, the lighting of a candle and the exchange of semi-formal spoken passages. These ceremonies of *compadrazgo* are usually arranged for the camera in otherwise empty rooms of the house, often in front of a household altar, which is usually artificially lit by the videographer to ensure that the footage comes out well.

In *Miriam, Mis Quince Años* we experience the exchange between her mother and brother and her principal godfather (*Padrino de Velacion*) in a small room. The room is full of people who stand in a rough circle, with their backs to the walls. Facing us, in mid shot, Miriam stands with her mother and brother. To the left of the shot, at the edge of the screen, her godfather delivers a long speech, which we can barely make out over the noise of the party. He hands a large food basket (*chiquihuite*) to the *quinceañera's* brother before distributing stems of flowers amongst those in the room. Miriam's mother then delivers a much shorter speech before the ceremony is closed as each of the assembled passes the *quinceañera* and her family, offering her the flower they have been given and a brief, formal embrace. Where migrant *padrinos* are chosen, and cannot be present at the *fiesta*, this scene is enacted for the video camera by members of the *padrino's* family. Later, when the video arrives in the US and the *padrino* watches it, this videographic acknowledgement of his absence, like the credit sequence, facilitates his inclusion in the imagined place brought into being as he watches the video.

The role of the event video in creating a place of identity and security for the production and reproduction of social bonds in the transnational community is reinforced by other, more subtle attempts to include absent migrants in its audiovisual assemblage. The master of ceremonies at the *fiesta*, who leads the assembled guests through the day – speaking through a microphone connected to a huge bank of speakers – always makes frequent repeated references to the members of the family and the community in general, who are assumed to be ‘watching’ in the USA. These greetings or ‘*saludos*’ are timed to correspond with moments at which videographers are sure to be recording and are often aimed at specific migrants who are mentioned by name. In *Tatiana – Mis Quince Años*, for example, a *saludo* is sent to her brother. Tatiana is about to cut the cake. As she stands, knife in hand, the master of ceremonies who is chattering to his audience,

attempting to whip up a bit of excitement about the imminent confection, launches into a detailed acknowledgment of those in the US and, specifically, Tatiana's brother Juan:

*“Long live Tlaxcala, and hello over there, our friends in New York, Tatiana’s brother most of all, who is there in New York, we send you warm greetings from here, we are celebrating here and, well, you stayed up there because you wanted to but here we are celebrating... he wanted to miss out!”*

This inclusion of Juan in the cinematic performance of the *fiesta* is important to the family who no doubt wish that he were with them. Its critical function, however, is to include Juan in the audiovisual assemblage of the event video, thus insuring his presence in the imagined place it brings into being – the filmic home that it creates.

## Conclusion

Event videos are audiovisual assemblages that work to create a distinct place of belonging – a filmic home – within which the bonds crucial to the social structure of San Francisco can be maintained despite the physical ruptures caused by undocumented migration. By emulating the aesthetics of popular television the event video creates an affinity between the imagined selves of those who contribute to its creation and those who later consume its images and sounds. As it is produced, its fictionalising camera work and post-production techniques transform that which is depicted, completing the cinematic performance of those before the camera as they enact the imagined selves brought into being through other mediated experiences. When it is consumed, the event video's specific combination of images and sounds encourage the viewer to engage with it as fiction. As the migrant viewer deploys memories of mediated, screen-bound experiences in making sense of the filmic assemblage before her she experiences a collectively created and known imagined place.

By uniting the 'imagined selves' of those on both sides of the border this imagined place, constantly recreated through the production and creation of event videos, overcomes the distances between separated family members. By repeating its formulaic filmic re-constructions of lived places, the event video ensures that its audiovisual assemblages minimise signs of the passing of time. Through this negation of space and time the event video avoids the emotional upheaval implied in more directly indexical audiovisual communication that draws on memories of lived experience. In this way the constant and unchanging imagined place of the filmic home allows the transnational community a safe space for the creation and confirmation of relationships of kinship and fictive kinship across the painful distances in space and time, which separate its members.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### EVOKING THE SAN FRANCISCO FILMIC PLACE *900,000 Frames Between Us*

“Found footage films based on montage of disparate and incongruous images are more likely to challenge the media’s power to make ideologically loaded images seem like unmediated representations of reality”

William Wees (1993:48)

#### Introduction

The intention of *900,000 Frames Between Us* is to evoke, in the mind of the viewer, a sense of the ‘filmic home’ of the transnational community, brought into being through engagements with event videos. The filmic place brought into being through our relationship with David MacDougall’s sequence of the shepherd making cheese gives us a sense of the lived place that the shepherd occupies. MacDougall uses his filmed interactions with the lived scene, and edits the images and sounds he has captured to create a filmic assemblage, our relation with which creates an affinity between our body and that of the shepherd we see and hear. My aim in making *900,000 Frames Between Us* is to use the juxtaposition of images and sounds, including those from event videos, to create a filmic assemblage that allows viewers an affinity both with the lived bodies of my interlocutors and, more crucially, with the imagined selves which their relationship with event videos bring into being. Just as David MacDougall’s own embodied relationship with the environment is his frame of reference for understanding the lived experience of shepherd before him, my understanding of the places and selves brought into being through the creation and consumption of event videos are based in my own relationship with those videos. *900,000 Frames Between Us* deploys the

techniques of found footage filmmaking described in Chapter 2 in its attempt to make my experiential and prelinguistic understanding of that filmic place – something that cannot be put into words – accessible to others. It is my hope that this audiovisual ethnography of filmic place might allow viewers a unique and valuable understanding of the San Francisco transnational community.

In this chapter I will use a close reading of *900,000 Frames Between Us* to reflect on the possibility that filmic assemblages might work to provide such an ‘ethnography of filmic place’. I will describe the way in which the structure of the film – its fragmentary juxtaposition of formally controlled shots with the images and sounds of San Francisco event videos – denies the viewer access to a single pro-filmic lived ‘reality’, encouraging an engagement with the images shown as negotiations between lived and imagined selves. Enhanced by the use of migrant testimony to evoke a sense of (often traumatic) migrant lived experience, this filmic strategy aims to foster, in the viewer, a sense of identification with the migrants’ experience of self-as-other in relation to the event video. Implicit to this discussion is a critique of the limited scope of documentary realist audiovisual work which confines itself to the evocation and exploration of corporeal space as well as a suggestion that the work of filmmakers outside of visual anthropology might offer ‘jumping off points’ for alternative approaches to the anthropological understanding of human experience.

### Opening Up the Filmic Space

Since my aim in *900,000 Frames Between Us* is to move beyond the representation of corporeal space, to evoke a sense of the power of audiovisual media to transcend the places we know through lived experience, it is vitally important that the work intrinsically reflect on its own ways of making meaning. The formal properties of the footage that makes up the work intentionally function to distance the viewer from a direct identification with the corporeal space of the bodies represented. They work to emphasise the nature of this relationship as one mediated by video. All of the event video footage used is re-photographed from television screens in migrant homes. This rephotography is tangible in the image and sound quality of the footage: the grainy nature of the low-res video is

emphasised by the cross-hatched texture of cathode ray screens. We hear the rustling and chatting of migrants in the room as they watch the video and occasionally catch a glimpse of my tripod reflected in the domed glass face of the television set. The pixilated fuzz of degraded VHS tapes and damaged DVDs is foregrounded, the texture of a baby's head or a breeze block wall obscured by the random flashing of squares which remind us of the smoke and mirrors behind the magic we are experiencing and bring our attention back to the material we are watching and its filmic re-construction of space.



Stills from *900,000 Frames Between Us*  
at time code 9'30"



16'45"

These techniques make a definitive and explicit move away from the smooth incorporation of found footage in realist documentary to illustrate a particular argument or point of view. In realist documentary, what William Wees describes as 'compilation film' (1993:32), such cinematic quotations are intended to contribute to the viewers' sense of the corporeal space of the bodies imaged. In *9000,000 Frames Between Us* my intention is not to use event video footage to augment the audience's sense of the places brought into being through the lived experiences of the migrants and their families, but to suggest and explore the ways in which their experience of such footage allows these places to be transcended and exceeded. Scenes combining moments at which the screen is filled with event video footage with shots of television screens contextualised in the localities of the rooms in which that footage is consumed emphasise this by reminding us of our own experiences of ourselves-as-other through our relationship with television screens and the extent to which these experiences transcend our lived experiences of their

images and sounds. By moving between a depiction of mediation and a depiction of that which is mediated, these sequences reinforce a sense of the power of that mediation in allowing us to feel, and be, other.



3'27"



44'53"

This sense of the event video footage giving us access to particular experiences of ourselves-as-other is reinforced by the formal structure of the footage that surrounds it. My specific ways of using the camera in the videographic reflections made in both Mexico and the USA, are conscious comments on, and responses to, the realist tropes of documentary and particularly of observational film. The static wide shots I used to frame the village in Mexico are intended to emphasise the presence of the camera, and of my eye and body in positioning it. They also materialise and demonstrate the implications of cinematic form for the way in which we experience a place through moving images. By taking my filmic interaction with the village to its simplest level, a filmic lowest common denominator, these shots function to foreground the way in which both they and the event video footage with which they are juxtaposed, make meaning.

Whilst the footage I made in the USA was more mobile and responsive to my lived experiences there, its form was nonetheless restricted within formal parameters defined before shooting. My intention in imposing these restrictions was to maintain a tangible sense of the video structuring the viewer's experience, rather than simply conveying 'reality'. Shots made in the USA were to be short, rapid, loud and close, without contextualising wide shots. My decision to minimise the use of faces was partly on ethical grounds, to protect the undocumented migrants

with whom I was working, but also to anonymise ‘the migrant’ as uprooted and out of place. This perspective, combined with a sense of the migrant’s lived experience as claustrophobic, noisy, stressful and tiring, emphasises the importance of the migrant’s experience of the event video in offering an alternative experience of self in relation to the world, an alternative sense of emplacement.

This self-reflexive foregrounding of form and material in the structure of *900,000 Frames Between Us* – its explicit acknowledgement of the mediated nature of its own images – is perhaps most explicitly demonstrated in the use of pastiche. The opening sequence of the film is a shot by shot replication of the start of the event video that it incorporates. The video *Tatiana – Mis Quince Años*, which begins with the same glittering golden screen and pink hearts, is embedded in the beginning of my piece as I videographically mimic it, inserting my own corporeal presence. This insertion of my own body, my own lived experience, into the filmic form of the event video can be read as a continuation of the kinaesthetic learning described in Chapter 3. By entering the territory of the event video, by making an event video of myself, I explore the imagined territory to which that video takes me, the imagined self which it allows me. More importantly, however, this sequence encourages the viewer to experience me, and the story of this project, on the terms and through the space of the San Francisco event video. The viewer is forced to make sense of what she is seeing by submitting to the logic of the event video and its way of making meaning. This prologue is intended to act as the metaphorical opening of a theatre curtain, which clearly establishes the proscenium around a stage set for the evocation and exploration of filmic space.

#### The Filmic Space Between Images

This evocation and exploration is primarily realised through the juxtaposition of ontologically distinct footage ‘types’. *900,000 Frames Between Us* combines images and sounds from two different sources – San Francisco event videos and my own ‘videographic reflections’ – which have differently structured relationships with the pro-filmic places of lived experience from which they emerge. The juxtaposition of these images, which often undermine or contradict one-another, further erodes any sense that the audiovisual assemblage we are consuming might

be an indexical representation of a coherent pro-filmic 'reality'. By creating a sense of disorientation in space and time these juxtapositions encourage us, as viewers, to accept and engage with the images before us as negotiations between lived and imagined places and selves. By creating oblique and unexpected relationships between its images, *900,000 Frames Between Us* aims to unearth those images, making them thin and difficult to read. In contrast to MacDougall's images of the shepherd, which instantly make sense to us in relation to our own memories of lived experiences, these 'optical images' send us deeper into memories of mediated as well as lived experiences as we remember the imagined selves and places which have been brought into being through our relationships with other audiovisual media. *900,000 Frames Between Us* attempts to harness this 'deep' experience – as we remember past experiences of our selves as other – to create a resonance between the imagined self of its viewer and the imagined selves and places brought into being through the creation and consumption of San Francisco event videos in the transnational community.

The first scene of the video jumps between long shots of grand houses being built in Mexico and close up rapid shots of migrants working in the USA. No explicit indication is given of the relationship between these shots and the pro-filmic localities or places they depict, we do not know where we are. In the tenth minute a harsh cut takes us from outside a school– the children sleepily waiting for the gate to open in the bright morning sun, the tip of the volcano *Popocatepetl* shimmering in the distance – to a rumbling and blurred grey winter view whipping through the screen. We see the inside of a train carriage. Dimly lit by the overcast sky, passengers are thrown from side to side as the carriage bumps along the elevated tracks. Several dreary vistas roll by, and we see a female passenger in close up, before the rolling grey asphalt melts into the black of a TV screen and the flickering static of a VHS tape about to play. The blue screen transmitted by the pending VCR machine gives way to a grainy image of the face of a child. The jagged and abrupt relationship between these images renders both the train carriage and the child's head strange. It is only as the video of the child plays out that we begin to feel that we know where we are. The little boy poses. As he lies on his bed the camera zooms in on his face before gently drawing out to show his whole body. He waves for the camera. The performative nature of these images,

and their tightly controlled and coherent construction, enable us to connect with them more easily than we do with the shifting montage that has come before. The boy is dressed in his toy soldier costume, and begins to parade through the town. The camera follows the members of the procession in a smooth pan as they pass on a street corner, lingering to show the backs of the *mariachis* as they move on down a hill and out of frame. The camera tilts down from the church spire, set against an impossibly blue sky, and frames the procession party as they approach the church door.

Even someone who has never visited Mexico might feel that they have been here before. The filmic devices the videographer employs to frame the *fiesta* and the village are collectively familiar to us. Our experience of this sequence calls on our memories of hundreds of other buildings we have come to know through such camera movements, hundreds of other imagined places brought into being through similarly constructed filmic assemblages. As we deploy such memories in making sense of the sounds and images of the event video, we experience a coherent imagined place and a coherent sense of ourselves-as-other in relation to that place. This experience of filmic emplacement, whilst different to that of the migrant viewer, gives us some sense of the imagined places and selves brought into being through the production and consumption of event videos in the transnational community.

The cut from event video to my static shot, which shows the same church entrance through the monolithic, static eye of the immobile camera, is intended to unbalance the viewer once again. The juxtaposition disorients us, emphasising the shifting and uncertain relationship between filmic place and lived place and the particular agency of the event video in using its sounds and images to evoke a coherent imagined place. Our uncertainty makes the imagined place we have experienced more tangible, making us aware that our experience of the event video has allowed a sense not of the lived place of San Francisco but of a filmically constructed place.



Sequence at 10'27"

This tangential evocation of the filmic place of the event video, a sense of emplacement in relation to the San Francisco 'filmic home', is fostered and encouraged throughout *900,000 Frames Between Us* as the viewer comes to know both the people and localities of the community through event video scenes. Contextualised within the disorienting montage of de-territorialised images and sounds, these scenes aim to encourage the viewer to draw on memories of mediated experiences and the imagined selves those experiences bring into being.

The footage from *Viridiana – Mis Tres Años*, during the twentieth minute of the film, takes us back to the same imagined church created through the camera's tilt from spire to doorway. The camera pulls out from a close up on Viridiana's face and we see her family, and later the congregation, more widely framed. The video moves outside and, framed within the TV of her mothers' room in New York, we see the little girl as she walks down the steps in front of the church. Her dress is gigantic and her tiny legs make slow progress. The camera slowly zooms in to a close up on the exterior of the Municipal Presidency building before once again framing Viridiana and her entourage as she totters through the frame. The camera zooms in on her face before framing the church behind her in a wide shot which tilts upwards towards the tower, drawing in on the spire in a symmetrical reflection of the earlier filmic construction of the building.

The video plays on, re-constructing Viridiana and the *fiesta* that surrounds her through the characteristic pans and tilts that place her in the filmic place of the imagined town. We arrive at her house through a close up shot of the plastic figurine sitting atop her fairytale four-tiered cake. The camera tilts down and pulls back, taking in the cake from top to bottom. Zooming in to frame the words written in icing '*Felicidades Viridiana*' (congratulations Viridiana), the shot widens just in time as Viridiana is held aloft to take a bite of the cake and cut the

first slice. The scene's smooth timing and cinematic poise, its way of drawing relationships between objects and people, enables us to experience a particular sense of closeness to the little girl who is its star. By transforming her, making her part of an imagined place, which we can make sense of by drawing on our shared memories of mediated as well as lived experiences, the video makes her familiar to us. The wide shot which ruptures this scene – a shot taken from my 'videographic reflections' – distances us once again, throwing us back into our individual memories where we grapple to make sense of it. The little girl who plays in the mud in the sun-dappled yard, unaware that she is being watched by the camera, seems impossibly far away.



Sequence at 21'14"

*900,000 Frames Between Us* attempts to use the logic of the event video to connect viewers not only with the filmically re-constructed people of San Francisco but also with the huge migrant houses, built with remittances sent from the USA, which are filmically completed through event videos. The static shots which frame the houses as they stand in the landscape, are distancing and create a sense of the houses as floating, de-territorialised structures. The still eeriness of these exterior images resonates with the hollow emptiness of the breeze block shells. This mournful and brooding atmosphere is entirely absent from event video footage of the houses as they are being built and as they reach completion. In the twenty-fifth minute of *900,000 Frames Between Us*, a section of event video footage filmically re-creates a house under construction. The camera tilts up from the entrance to the unfinished house and moves from empty window to empty window. Moving upstairs the camera follows the line of the unfinished roof, and moves around the breeze block walls of future rooms. Although shakier than much of the event video footage, these shots nonetheless attempt the smooth pans and tilts characteristic of the San Francisco event video and its re-configuration of the lived place of the village.



Sequence at 35'17"

Later we return to the same house and the camera enters a tiled bathroom and tilts from toilet to showerhead. Upstairs it traces the edge of an elegantly molded picture rail before taking us into a room with a vaulted ceiling where the view tilts towards the apex of the room. The camera comes to rest on the gold painted cornicing, following it all the way around the room to the window where it moves towards a view of the village below. The way in which the camera is used to frame the house and move over its surface makes the house familiar to us. We experience it through deploying memories of other mediated experiences of buildings, memories that elevate our experience of it beyond the quiet solitude of an empty breeze block shell.

#### Imagining the Imagining Body – Between Images and Words

The voices of migrants who speak throughout the film, are the most coherent materialisation of the corporeal space of lived experience. Migrant testimonies provide an oblique undercurrent to our experience of the event video footage. Our identification with these voices, and our experiences of their words, give shape to our experience of the San Francisco event video, molding our experience of a generic 'imagined place' into a more discretely shaped virtual realm brought into being through the relationship of another lived body with the filmic assemblage before us. As we experience the often difficult words of the testimonies, we imagine ourselves into the corporeal spaces that migrants describe. We become cinematically enclosed between the uncomfortable places of migrants' lived experiences and the imagined places brought into being through the consumption of event videos. As we identify with the migrants' corporeal experiences, and with the sad stories they tell, it makes us need the filmic place we experience through

the event video. In this way the relationship between images and words shapes our experience of the San Francisco filmic space in line with that of the migrant.

The first time we hear Don José's low and resonant voice he describes leaving his young children in Mexico as he heads across the border in search of work. *"I left them all small,"* he says, with an air of resigned sadness, *"my daughter was one month old, the others more or less knew me, but not her. Or my youngest son."* José's description calls to mind the physical situation of his departing, perhaps we envisage the tiny baby he is leaving behind, the faces of the older children as he leaves. We remember our own experiences of painful separation, which brings to our minds, and our bodies, the pain they imply. The words are laid under images and sounds from the beginning of an event video – stock footage of cascading water accompanied by instrumental music. As our experience of the gushing waterfall and the rousing music connect with our memories of other mediated experience, the familiar saccharine grandeur of the geographically ambiguous scene offers a welcome respite from the corporeal and emotional discomfort of Don José's words.



6'10"



12'12"

A few minutes later, a scene juxtaposes the event video images of the child as he is dressed in the toy soldier costume with the spoken testimony of his mother as she describes leaving him to migrate. This scene similarly attempts to evoke, in the viewer, a sense of the complex relationship between the migrant mother and these moving images and sounds. The boy lies on the bed. The camera roves over him as his clothes are changed. *"I haven't seen him for seven years,"* his mother says, *"I*

*imagine him as I left him – little. I left him sleeping, not properly sleeping – he could tell I was leaving and he didn't want to sleep.*” Our identification with this mother leaving her infant son is painful and encourages us into the filmic place of the event video. We enter into a more hopeful relationship with the child as he is transformed by the video, smiling and waving as he is reconstructed by the smooth pans and zooms of the camera. These passages seek to build on the viewers’ sense of the places migrants experience through lived experiences – the affinity of lived bodies – combining it with viewers’ experience of the event video footage as generative of an imagined place. This affinity between the imagined self of the migrant and that of the viewer is deepened and made more profound as migrant testimonies become more complex, developing from descriptions of lived, corporeal experience to the exploration of mental processes, dreams and fantasies.

As the little girl in the enormous dress totters down the church steps, Veronica describes a dreamt reunion with her estranged daughter:

*“Sometimes you dream that you are with your daughter, you’re there sharing everything with her, even though it’s a dream it feels real. Then you wake up and realise it was all a dream, but you think ‘that’s what it’ll be like’, it’ll be just like in my dream.”*

This juxtaposition takes us further beyond a cine-mimetic identification with Veronica’s lived body to an imagined relationship with the body she imagines in her dream. As we listen to her dream we relate to her story, and the event video images we see, both in terms of the affinity we feel to her lived body but also through our own memories of dreaming and fantasy. As we imagine Veronica dreaming, our experiences of the images we see become bound up with our own mental processes of fantasy and imagining. This process of imagining Veronica’s imagined self strengthens the affinity between her experience of self-as-other in relation to the event video footage and our own.

On a scene by scene basis, then, the juxtaposition of the images and sounds of various footage types in *900,000 Frames Between Us* is intended to offer the viewer a sense of the imagined places and selves brought into being through creation and consumption of event videos in the transnational community. In a broader sense the overarching structure of the film and authorial interventions in the order and flow of images is intended to evoke a sense of the consequences of these imagined places and selves for the people of San Francisco as I came to understand them through the video-based ethnography described in this thesis. As I outline in Chapter 4, my fieldwork led me to understand the creation and consumption of event videos as generative of a constantly revitalised imagined place. A filmic home whose spatiotemporal constancy overcomes the separation over vast distances and the painful passing of time inherent in life in the transnational community.

My understanding of the importance of this filmic home in providing an imagined place resistant to the passing of time is expressed in the structure of *900,000 Frames Between Us*. The repetitive and atemporal clips from event videos are surrounded with footage, which emphasises the passing of time in lived experience. The static shots of the village and the frenetic footage of migrants working, move the video through the cycle of a day from dawn until dusk and through the agricultural cycle from planting to harvest. This progression is intended to convey a sense of the relief event videos provide from the relentless march of time and also to give a sense of the often expressed feeling of migrants that time moves faster in the USA than it does in Mexico. The feeling that ‘village time’ moves more slowly was a constant feature in my conversations with migrants and is directly expressed in several of the testimonies featured in *900,000 Frames Between Us*: “In Mexico, a day really lasts, I feel that time goes slower there... I want to go back to Mexico, life in the US is boring, time slips away and you can’t feel it.”

*900,000 Frames Between Us* attempts to express this sense of time slipping away for the temporally as well as locationally dislocated migrant and the importance of

the filmic home brought into being by the event video as crucial in providing a constant anchor point in time as well as space. As migrants work day after day, the sun rises and their houses grow, the corn is picked and its stalks dry. Migrants grow older and their parents die, but the event video continues to create and make available a constant place and time where these changes are minimised. Although the progression of event videos shown in *900,000 Frames Between Us* also respects the progression of time, which follows the life's cycle from baptism to marriage, change is minimised rather than accentuated. Don José has watched the video of his youngest daughter's baptism and the video of her sister's wedding ten years apart, and yet, through their similarity in filmic style they allow him an experience of the same time and place – a place that, unlike the lost places of passing lived experience – is available to him constantly and indefinitely.



43'18"

The use of superimposition in *900,000 Frames Between us* is, perhaps, the crudest evocation of the filmic place of the event video but also, arguably, the most important. The superimposition of event video footage over moving images of migrants is a powerful audiovisual expression of the imagined relationships

brought into being through the creation and consumption of event videos. The utopian land and seascapes characteristic of event video opening sequences are used in *900,000 Frames Between Us* to ‘connect’ migrants, and their lived places, to the filmic places of event videos. Estela is making tacos when she is lifted into aerial shots of a sunset sea. Gabi and Augustín’s room is subsumed under a shimmering sea as a school of shiny fish ripple through the shot. These transitions are more than prettifications or ironic gestures. They are expressions of the genuine and profound transformations I felt – and of the places I came to know – through my involvement in the creation and consumption of event videos in the transnational community. In the last scene of *900,000 Frames Between Us*, as Don José watches his daughter’s ‘first waltz’ as a bride, and the compere asks for his presence on the dance floor, his appearance videographically as a part of this image is intended as a solidification of my understanding of his extant presence in the imagined place brought into being as he experiences the event video.

This use of superimposition is combined with re-photography, which allowed me to suggest migrants’ interactions with videos as they used remote controls to scroll through their images. The simulation of these movements in post-production allowed me a control over the flow of images crucial in making the San Francisco filmic home available to viewers from outside of the transnational community. The footage I recorded from TV screens in migrant homes was laden with the jagged lines and halting images as VHS tapes and DVDs were rewound, fast-forwarded, paused and played. I describe in Chapter 3 the way in which my interlocutors often searched for family members in the video footage, pausing to examine an outfit or a facial expression. This mode of engaging with video through the remote control was common in all of the homes where I watched and recorded videos and often extended to the practice of simply ‘watching the good bits’. The recorded movements around the videotapes and DVDs are powerful materialisations of migrant relationships with their images and sounds. Included as scenes in *900,000 Frames Between Us*, they emphasise the importance of the event video in offering a controllable, repeatable and always accessible experience of a constant space and time. The video rewinds, the play button pressed just in time to see the plastic merry-go-round atop a cake as the camera pulls out to show a young boy

about to take a bite. Another tape fast-forwards taking us to a bouncy castle where two little boys jump for the camera.

Through the sparing use of controlled re-photography I use this *rewind-pause-play* mechanism as an expressive filmic device. The final scene of the main body of *900,000 Frames Between Us*, which juxtaposes the stop frame images of a rewinding DVD with a night-time journey on an inner city train line, was created entirely in post-production as I re-photographed event video footage from my own TV monitor. As Don José's image separates from the video of his daughter's waltz and he looks directly towards me and the camera, the DVD begins to rewind, still images flickering before us, each remaining on the screen for a split second as the action is reversed. The bride and groom move back through the festivities, their thrown cider glasses are returned to their hands and they move away from each other, backwards out of their consummating kiss. The image of glistening urban lights moving past a train window take over before we begin to flicker back through the other event video footage we have seen during the course of the video: the house gets smaller, its construction moving backwards to the laying of the first stone, the children get younger, their images flickering faster whilst the roar of the train grows stronger and stronger. As our senses begin to be assaulted – the noise becoming almost unpleasant and the movement of the reflected train lights flickering green – we are relieved to return to the image of the gently trickling waterfall and, as these images reverse before us and the green arrow of the play button is displayed, the waterfall is, once again, allowed to flow. We feel that we have returned to a place we know, a place where we want to be.

## Conclusion

The filmic devices of documentary realism as they have been deployed in observational filmmaking are very effective in creating filmic assemblages, the experience of which evokes, for the viewer, a sense of the corporeal experiences and lived places of those depicted. Our cine-mimetic responses to such filmmaking creates an affinity, what David MacDougall describes as a resonance, between our bodies and the bodies of those before the camera (1998b:53), allowing us a corporeal sense of their emplacement in relation to the world. The found footage

filmmaking I have described here attempts to move beyond this corporeal affinity, the affinity of bodies, to a resonance of imaginations. *900,000 Frames Between Us* intentionally obscures the viewers' cine-mimetic experience of the bodies it depicts in order to encourage an engagement of memory that moves beyond the corporeal. It attempts to prompt, in the viewer, memories of mediated experiences, and the imagined selves and places that those experiences have brought into being. In so doing the work strives not to prompt a cine-mimetic experience *of* the bodies depicted, but to align the cine-mimetic responses of the viewer *with* those of the bodies depicted. Through the juxtaposition of ontologically diverse footage, the selective use of migrant voices and interventions to control the order and flow of images, the work aims to allow viewers a sense of the imagined places and selves experienced by members of the San Francisco community, as they are involved in the creation and consumption of event videos. In doing so, *900,000 Frames Between Us* functions as an audiovisual ethnography of the San Francisco filmic place.

## Conclusions

My principal aim in this project has been to create an ethnography of a particular filmic place as a catalyst and contribution to the expansion of visual anthropology's engagements with vernacular audiovisual media. I have aimed to move beyond the 'ethnographic film' restricted to representing the lived experience of cultural others through moving images, beyond attempts to 'allow' erstwhile subjects to 'represent themselves' through the moving images of indigenous media, and beyond the tendency of written anthropology to treat audiovisual media as if they were texts. The project aims to generate and propose new strategies for anthropological engagements with vernacular media that respect the way in which those media work to augment the lived experiences of those who create and consume them.

This hybrid approach attempts to adapt methodological strategies developed in sensory ethnography to the investigation of the imagined places brought into being through the production and consumption of event videos. Drawing on theoretical and methodological frameworks from fine art and film studies has allowed me to deploy video as a tool to investigate the production and consumption of San Francisco event videos. In sensory ethnography, anthropologists use physical participation in the lives of others to understand the places brought into being through the relationships between the bodies and minds of those others and the material world around them. By moving closer to the experiences of their research participants – becoming similarly emplaced in relation to the material world – anthropologists come to understand the way in which those participants constitute, and are constituted by, their world. They come to understand not only how those 'others' see, hear and feel the world around them but also the imagined processes which their relationship with the world implies. The ethnographic principle of learning through doing has been the central rationale of this project.

By actively participating in the production and consumption of event videos, I have attempted to understand the relationship between them and the people who make and consume them. I have used filmic participation in the 'videographic life' of the

transnational community to move my experiences of San Francisco event videos closer to those of my research participants in order to understand the particular nature of the places and selves that those videos bring into being. My broad interdisciplinary approach has led to my use of video editing strategies inspired by avant-garde filmmaking to refine and convey the resulting knowledge. In this way the research has avoided the reduction of these ephemeral and essentially non-linguistic processes to the inadequate descriptive framework of written language. I present this investigation, then, as an ethnography of filmic place, a contribution to the anthropology of San Francisco which rests on the integration of video not simply as a form of representation but at every stage of research and publication.

Anthropologist Louisa Schein (2008) has written of the limitations of the semiotic analysis of audiovisual artefacts and the importance of considering the formal qualities of media firmly alongside an understanding of the way in which they are produced and consumed. "Television, videos and other media," she writes, "are not only about meanings harboured within actual texts. Media's webs of significance are imminent in their social consequences and their relations of production and reception as well" (p.188). Schein argues for the consideration of the 'inter-subjective spaces' brought into being through the consumption of media, especially in transnational communities. She emphasises the importance of the anthropological consideration not only of *what* media means but also *how* it means in different cultural contexts (p.193). Since we cannot, she argues, make the audiovisual materials of media our primary object of analysis, we must undertake ethnographies of their conditions of production, distribution and consumption to contextualise our analyses of their contents.

I hope that the work I have done here might simultaneously build on Schein's proposal and challenge her pessimism by suggesting conceptual and methodological frameworks within which to deal directly with audiovisual material. Such research allows for a consideration of vernacular media not simply as collections of images and sounds, which symbolically mediate social relationships, but as mimetically active assemblages generative of particular experiences of emplacement, particular imagined places, which can be legitimately and fruitfully studied by the anthropologist.

As video becomes more affordable and accessible, the need for scholars to engage with it on its own terms becomes more apparent. Although specific methodological approaches will vary from project to project, the integration of the production and consumption of video as participant observation ethnography, and the presentation of the results of such investigation in audiovisual form, must be incorporated into anthropological considerations of vernacular media if we are to understand them properly. This “expression of experience by experience” (Sobchack, 1995:36) will lead to new understandings of the relationships between lived and filmic places in different cultural contexts, contributing to our anthropological knowledge of specific communities but also allowing us to develop a more nuanced and complex sense of the nature of filmic emplacement. Such a discourse might echo the rich dialogue between the practical work of sensory ethnographers and the concepts of phenomenological philosophy in which their work is grounded.

The development of such a dynamic is particularly crucial in the visual anthropology of vernacular media production, an area of scholarship which, as I outline in Chapter 1, has been dominated by a rhetorical polarization with audiovisual ‘expressions of culture’ (indigenous media films and tapes) pitted against the corrosive penetration of the media at large. The tendency of the San Francisco event video to generalise experience, creating evocations of genericised fantasy, reflective of the a-cultural and ideologically loaded virtual world of mass media might be vilified by an anthropology exclusively interested in ‘culture’. Event videos might be regarded as examples of cultural imperialism, demonstrative of the pernicious onslaught of westernization. Certainly the tone of the indigenous media discourse would suggest such a stance. I would argue for a consideration of such media, and the imagined processes their production and consumption imply, as delicate and complex negotiations of corporate identity and expression vitally important to the socio-cultural survival of such transnational, but also more static communities as they adapt to the rigors of global capitalism. As Garcia Canclini (1995) has argued, it is vital that anthropology move beyond a discourse of ‘authenticity’ if it is to understand the way in which powerful forces play out in the

hybrid cultures which have always been the consequence of a differentially modernised, modernising and post-modern world.

Thinking through our relationship with audio-visual media as one of emplacement literally allows us space to consider their complex implications for lived experience. The written ethnographies of transnational vernacular media practices, to which I refer in Chapter 1, emphasise the need for such a space. Respecting the importance of vernacular media as agents of filmic emplacement might shed new light on the ‘romantic’ framing of landscapes and people in Hmong ‘homeland tapes’ (Schein, 2004: 435), or the off-air recordings of news and other programming on the tapes sent from Macedonia to Australia (Kolar-Panov, 1997:217). Widespread, coherent and sustained video-based engagement, of the kind I have described here, would contribute rich knowledge to the ethnographies of these transnational communities. Perhaps more importantly such research would provide detailed ethnographic knowledge about the diverse and various ways that video works in everyday life. Such an understanding of the ways in which culturally diverse communities make and consume video would contribute to the evolution of ‘filmic emplacement’ as a more sophisticated and nuanced anthropological concept.

Laura Marks concludes *The Skin of the Film* by reflecting on the argument that the commodification and globalisation of culture is in danger of wiping out cultural differences, even at the level of sensuous experiences (2000:243). She muses on the increasing abundance of ‘placelessness’ or generic places, the shopping malls and airports described by Marc Augé as ‘non-places’ (Auge, 1995) but concludes that even within such commodified and universal environments “intercultural life will continue to produce new and unmanageable hybrids. Even in this world of increasingly generic senses,” she writes “particular sense memories are places within non-places. Against the tide of the commodification and genericisation of sense experience, pools of local sensuous experience are created anew” (p.245). With the development of the video-based ethnographies I am proposing here, the filmic spaces brought into being by the San Francisco event video and many other vernacular video forms might come to be thought of as just such hybrid spaces. The event video uses ‘global’ aesthetics and ‘generic’ images to allow experiences,

which are local and culturally specific. Whilst the virtual world, the fictional realm which the event video brings into being, encourages viewers to consume the video 'as fiction', the imagined place which the videos bring into being is as specific to the San Francisco transnational community as the lived experiences in either Mexico or the US. This specificity is ensured by the configuration of the generic images, by their deployment in relation to the lived place of the town and in the profound intertwining of the social relationships of family and *compadrazgo* in the structure of the videos. The event video, then, co-opts the aesthetics of non-place for the creation of a culturally specific place of belonging.

The unique importance of audiovisual media in bringing this place into being is manifest and strangely tangible on a brief walk around the unpaved side streets of San Francisco. As migrants become established in the US and are able to send home remittances, they often begin construction projects. The houses which they build are often extremely large and, departing from the architectural style traditional to the local area, they often display whimsical features: turrets and towers which dwarf the single-storey adobe houses of which, only one generation ago, the entire village was composed. These houses dominate the lived place of the village and feature heavily in both San Francisco event videos and my video *900,000 Frames Between Us*. They typically remain perpetually unfinished and lie empty as they are gradually improved over seasons and years, awaiting the return of migrants who frequently make the US their permanent home. The conceptual affinity between the imagined place of the video and these fantastical physical structures is illustrated both by the prevalence of 'house footage' in event videos and the frequent use of the uninhabited houses as locations for parties: they are often essentially film sets.

These empty shells of houses underline the power of audiovisual media. Whilst event videos make the aspirations, dreams and fantasies of the transnational community tangible, sharable, livable and repeatable, the houses simply emphasise how impossible those imagined futures are. Ultimately the houses stand as monuments to the unique ability of moving images to create collectively experienced virtual worlds. The sense of perfection and unity brought into being through the cine-mimetic experience of the screen-bound fictional place of the

event video cannot be materialised in the breeze blocks and cement of even the most ornate structure. The lumbering dysfunctionality of palatial migrant houses as they sit empty, lining the busy streets of an economically deprived village, suggests the possibility that the imagined place made possible by event videos and the mass media which inspire them might ultimately drive a wedge through and between the lived places of the transnational community. By fostering the imagination and facilitating the temporary incarnation of imagined places and imagined selves, these media further fragment the already distant corporeal experiences of a widely scattered population. The vibrancy of this imagined realm, which can never be fully materialised, always existing over the horizon, conceptually 'between' the lived places of the village and the migrant communities in the USA, fuels a cycle of false expectations both of migration and of return. The maintenance of family and *compadrazgo* relationships through the affinity of imagined bodies over long periods of time leads to interpersonal alienation as distant lived bodies become less and less familiar.

Radical increases in the availability of both affordable video equipment and Internet access, which have gained considerable ground since I began this research and continue at a rapid pace, will no doubt have a profound influence on the role of video in the life of the transnational community. When I began this research project in 2007, only one of the families with whom I worked owned a video camera. Although the vast proliferation of mobile phones with video recording capability has yet to hit San Francisco, where most use the most basic and affordable handsets, it is increasingly common for migrants in the USA to own mobile devices with integrated cameras and 'smart phones'. Across the transnational community, in both Mexico and the USA, the falling price of digital stills cameras which record video have made them a commonly owned item. At the time of writing in March 2011, only one of the families who collaborated in this project does not have easy access to such a camera.

Event videos, however, remain the most important method of audiovisual exchange between San Francisco migrants and their families. Whilst some (mostly young couples separated by the migration of one party) have begun to use live video conferencing services such as Skype, most migrants do not have access to the

Internet in their homes. In the village of San Francisco, where there is a shortage of phone lines, most families are restricted to using Internet cafes, which are prohibitively expensive for many and lack the privacy, which might be desired for intimate conversation. Despite these limitations there has been a steady proliferation over the last two years of videos recorded in the community on sharing sites such as YouTube. Such videos often focus on carnival dancing or religious festivals, both in Mexico and the US, and share some of the stylistic traits of the event videos discussed here.

The presence of video on sharing sites combined with the increasing use of social networking facilities such as *Facebook*, *MSN messenger* and *Hi-5*, particularly by young migrants and their siblings and friends, is beginning to open the landscape of transnational video communication. Further and ongoing research is needed to map out the relationships between the virtual places created through such increasingly complex multimedia environments and the lived places of the transnational community. Inevitably these new and constantly morphing hybrid spaces will imply reconfigurations of sensuous and imagined experience. The physicality of the event video disc, as it arrives wrapped in its colourful box, surrounded by walnuts or sunflower seeds, smelling of home, was, at the time of this research, a large part of its importance. This may change, as the availability of the Internet increases and alternative methods for the sharing of video become more widely established and sophisticated.

Perhaps as images and sounds move more frequently and more freely between individual migrants and their families, videos will transmit more direct and sensuous experiences within them. As migrants and their families are able to eat 'together', with the webcam 'on' in both homes, sharing the moment through the immediacy of the computer screen, perhaps the exchange of event videos and food packages will stop. Or perhaps the San Francisco community will eschew such 'constant contact'. Conjecture is difficult in a world where technological possibility and accessibility are changing so rapidly. My research suggests, however, that whilst developments in vernacular media use will be, to some extent, determined by technological advances and economic factors, the way in which new technologies are appropriated and developed in San Francisco will express both

the lived and mediated experiences of the transnational community. It is likely that the expanded horizon offered by such media will continue to facilitate a negotiation of lived and imagined places and selves.

The rapid pace of change in audiovisual and new media technologies, which augment the places in which we live, has not so far been matched by developments in anthropology. The discipline has, in the main, been slow to adapt its conceptual and methodological frameworks to engage with mediated experiences. Despite the prevalence of audiovisual media, particularly video, and its profound effect on our relationship with the world, anthropological studies of both vernacular and new media continue to be largely based on classic (ie. not media generating) participant observation fieldwork written up in text-based publications. Such research does not, and cannot, take account of or express the phenomenological agency of audiovisual technologies. Where audiovisual media are used by visual anthropologists their scope is frequently limited by a tight focus on the investigation and representation of the corporeal places of lived experience within narrow stylistic conventions. By adopting conceptual frameworks that respect the phenomenological agency of audiovisual media alongside methodological approaches based on practical involvement in the creation and consumption of video and other media, anthropology might develop more substantial engagements with the rapidly changing and increasingly virtual landscapes, in which communities are created and maintained. The technological advances making such landscapes possible also facilitate the integration of audiovisual materials at every stage of research and publication. Such integration is crucial and urgent.

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## FILMOGRAPHY/ VIDEOGRAPHY

*A Movie*, Conner, B., USA, 1958, 12 mins. 16mm.

*Cihan's Video, Oder: Ein Fest Feur die Kamera*, Wolbert, B. & Callenius, M.U., Germany, 1998, 12mins, VHS. Private collection.

*Conquest*, Grierson, J., UK., 1929, 40mins, 35mm.

*Corazon Salvaje*, Salvador Mejia Alejandre, Mexico, 2009, XEW-TV (Canal de las Estrellas)

*Daughter Rite*, Citron, M., USA, 1978, 53mins, 16mm. Women Make Movies.

*Drifters*, Grierson, J., UK., 1929, 60mins, 35mm.

*Fuego en la Sangre*, Corcega, M. Mexico, 2008, XEW-TV (Canal de las Estrellas)

*Handsworth Songs*, Akomfrah, J. / Black Audio Film Collective. UK, 1985, 61mins, 16mm. Mongrel, NBPC.

*History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*, Tajiri, R., USA, 1991, 32mins, Video. Women Make Movies.

*My Mother's Place*. Fung, R., USA, 1990, 49mins, Video. Video Data Bank.

*Peggy and Fred in Hell*. Thornton, L., 1981-1994, Video, Video Data Bank / Women Make Movies

*Photo Wallahs: An Encounter with Photography in Mussoorie, a North Indian Hill Station*, MacDougall, D. and MacDougall, J., USA, 1991, 60mins, 16mm. Oxnard Film Productions.

*Sink or Swim*, Friedrich, S., USA, 1990, 48mins, 16mm. Outcast Films.

*Tempus de Baristas*, MacDougall, D., USA, 1997, 100mins, 16mm. Berkeley Media LLC.

*Tiempo de Vals*, Savage, R., 2006, 22mins, MiniDV. Royal Anthropological Institute.

*The Atomic Cafe*, Loader, J., Rafferty, K., & Rafferty, P., USA, 1982, 86mins, 16mm.

*The Way to My Father's Village*, Fung, R., USA, 1988, 38mins, Video. Video Data Bank.

*Tribulation 99*, Baldwin, C., USA, 1991, 48mins, 16mm.