

## Attempting an Ontology of Participatory Film



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## Abstract

In this video-essay, participatory filmmaker, Paul Cooke, and social anthropologist, Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, discuss in detail images from two activist-focussed, participatory video projects Cooke has run with young people in South Africa and Lebanon. They ask whether participatory film can communicate their creators' activist intentions to audiences often far removed from the original context of production. They challenge themselves to answer this question by deliberately juxtaposing their respective disciplines' distinct philosophical approaches to ontology.

Bazin's foundational discussion of the ontology of the photographic image (as a universally relatable 'essence' encapsulated in the image) is juxtaposed with anthropology's 'ontological turn' (a radical cultural-relativist focus on people and contextually situated meaning). The video-essay reflects on whether the young participant filmmakers' aesthetic choices generate images which speak for themselves or, alternatively, whether the transfigurations these images undergo through different registers of representation and curation – as the films move from community showcasing event to international film festival or academic setting – change their originally-intended meanings. In identifying tensions between proximity and distance, intimacy and exploitation, the potentials and limitations of mediating local activists' voices to remote audiences through film is left up to the spectator for final arbitration.

**Keywords:** Ontology, participation, filmmaking, anthropology, development, activism

## Introduction

Can participatory film communicate the intentions of those involved to audiences often far removed from the original context of production? In this video-essay, participatory filmmaker Paul Cooke and social anthropologist Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers set themselves an intellectual challenge: to answer this question by deliberately juxtaposing their respective discipline's distinct philosophical approaches to ontology (the way we know how things exist, in short: 'the study of being'). Their debate relates to Cooke's

participatory film projects with young people, worldwide, making films about their social environments.

While neither discussant would necessarily identify as ‘ontologists’ within their respective fields, this rhetorical experiment allows the juxtaposing of Bazin’s (1945) ontological paradigm regarding the essence of an image, as such, with a heightened cultural-relativist focus on the involved people. A sharp contrast emerges: the former points to the representational power of an image as universally decodable trace of the profilmic real (Marks 2000, 93); the latter holds that meaning-making and interpretation is always contingent on a distinct historical context and, thus, culturally specific (classically, Geertz 1973). According to the former, participatory-film images speak for themselves; according to the latter, a remote audiences’ lack of knowledge about the original context of film production might distort the young artists’ and activists’ originally intended messages. But should this even matter?

The video-essay is structured according to the iterative principles of a participatory project, with each section answering a key concern raised in the previous section. Part 1 introduces participatory film as a distinct mode. Part 2 explores Bazin’s ontological paradigm, using his foundational text for discussions of cinematic realism (1945). Part 3 challenges this through an introduction to the anthropological concept of ontology and the anthropologist’s spontaneous reactions to the footage in question. Part 4 features a debate between the two authors’ positions. This debate is then tested out in Part 5 via a closing sequence of images (including further participatory projects Cooke has run that have not been previously discussed), intended to provoke the audience to contemplate its own convictions.

The video begins by delving into the history and aims of participatory filmmaking as a distinct mode of production. At least since the late 1960s, participatory filmmaking has served as a human-rights advocacy tool in community and international development practice. Participatory film-based development projects generally promote social justice aims, invariably seeking to amplify otherwise seldom-heard voices in the mainstream media. Through making films, participants have the opportunity to reflect their lives back on themselves, allowing them to gain new insights into the issues they face. At the same time, such projects are conceptualised as activist films designed to communicate local perspectives to

stakeholders that can support communities to effect change (Mkwanzani et al. 2021). But what happens when the films are taken out of this context?

As part of the development industry at large, participatory projects have often been criticised for being part of an agenda set by the Global North for the Global South, with ‘participation’ been read as a way of ensuring community-level ‘buy in’ (e.g. Bierschenk 2014; Grierson 2010; Newman 2011). The projects presented in this video-essay were explicitly set up to challenge this power dynamic. Cooke acted as technical facilitator, with no editorial control, to each project which was developed by, and for, participants. However, the video-essay also raises this broader critique in its presentation of these films within the context of an academic debate performed in the Global North.

The initial footage presented provides visual insights into Cooke’s role of working with young local people telling their stories through films. Throughout, the footage emphasises the constructed nature of film representation, including ‘behind the scenes’ shots from selected participatory films authored by young people as well as from the filming of the video-essay itself. These shots are visually suggestive of what equitable cocreation, continuous critical self-reflection, and the facilitation of young people’s self-directed voice and agency in such projects can look like in practice.

The sample footage and associated sound, which the video-essay presents and discusses with Cooke’s former project participants’ explicit permission, are their own artistic and aesthetic creations. The video-essay credits their authorship and ownership of their films. Telling their own stories, most of the young filmmakers chose a denotative style of communication (Cooke 2022) which, for outsiders, sometimes makes uncomfortable viewing, challenging Western audiences’ ideas of propriety and evoking safeguarding calls.

Guided by the theoretical frameworks set up by the video-essayists, emerging questions include whether the images filmed, and the aesthetic choices made by the young filmmakers, can generate empathy true to their originally intended messages without additional contextualisation. By moving through different registers of representation and curation, from community showcasing event to international film festivals, or to academic debate, do the young art-

ists' messages become transfigured in ways which potentially challenge their creators' original intentions?

### **Bazin's ontology of the photographic image**

Participatory film interventions rely on the power of film to communicate the reality of the lived experience of the communities represented on screen. This theoretical assumption is often seen as beginning with André Bazin's (1945) notion of film being able to capture the essence of the profilmic event far more accurately, and ultimately more powerfully, than any other forms of aesthetic representation. Film scholars and practitioners have long challenged this kind of assumption and pointed to ambiguities in Bazin's concepts of both ontology and realism. For example, predating Bazin, John Grierson famously declared documentary filmmaking as 'the *creative treatment of actuality*' (1933, 8, authors' emphasis). More recently, Smith (2013, 2) noted Bazin's actual allowance for the ambiguity of 'reality', and how this explains different styles of filmic 'realisms'. Others remain adamant that Bazin's ontology identified film language and aesthetics as communicating 'deep meaning', revealing 'a certain truth', which is associated with the purpose of 'cinema to reveal both the essence and the concreteness of the world' (Verano 2022, 410). By this token, for instance, Bazin commended a 'cinema of duration' (1967, 76). This aimed to achieve realism through long takes meant to facilitate 'a different kind of engagement of the audience [...] to watch events unfolding and to interpret what they saw' (MacDougall 2019, 124).

Arguably, the filmmaker's long take of Aziza al-Zein's face discussed in the video-essay, with the camera resting on the woman's deep, expressive, facial lines that speak of suffering, just as much as her words and tears, also allowing for silences and hesitation in her speech, provide the viewer with an example of this kind of approach, as well as a strong experience of what has been termed haptic visuality (Marks 2000). The multi-sensory, affective, and embodied connection generated may mediate a sense of realism, perhaps in affirming universal human connectivity, but is this enough? Does a privileged audience's freedom for affective-empathic interpretation in the Global North of an artwork from the Global South do sufficient justice to its originally intended meaning and advocacy aims? Or, as the video-essay asks: does the audience get the message?

## The ontological turn in anthropology

Anthropology's ontological turn shifts the focus away from Bazin's ontology of the image to specific people and how they conceptualise themselves and their environment in potentially fundamentally different ways than external observers are familiar with. This approach thus invites readers to radically rethink their embedded, universalising assumptions. A Brazilian anthropologist spearheading the turn, Viveiros de Castro, was fiercely criticised for implying 'radical alterity' (Graeber 2015) in his study of indigenous Amazonians' 'perspectivism' (a distinct ontology of humans, non-humans, and environmental relations different from our own; 1998; 2019[2004]). While at the radical end, notably another anthropologist facilitating local community film projects in the wider Amazonian region earlier, also found that distinctly different aesthetic conventions rendered some of the indigenous film stories autonomously produced incomprehensible to external audiences (Turner 1992, 8-10; discussed in Banks 2005, 35). Importantly, the anthropological ontological turn highlights the limits of our language in describing conceptual schema different from our own (Heywood 2023).

Less radical anthropologists of the turn such as Holbraad and Pedersen (2017, 13; who Schwandner-Sievers is shown reading in the video-essay) suggest that it simply intensifies the discipline's already existing concepts and methodological imperatives such as 'culture,' 'cultural relativism,' and critical 'reflexivity'. For anthropologists, 'cultural relativism' indicates a methodological and epistemological technique aimed at understanding different world views and perceptions from within their specific contexts and positionality, rather than a moral judgement about cultural difference (Brown 2008).

Accordingly, Schwandner-Sievers queries whether we can truly know the experience, world views, motives and intentions of the people filmed or filming them, outside their historical context and without an interpersonal conversation with them. For example, even if Aziza al-Zein's tears might evoke a sense of transcultural '*universality of human experience*', exactly '*through*' this film's particularity in '*re-presenting experience*' (Taylor 1998, 19; italics in original), shouldn't we recognise the limits of our differently situated interpretations and, thus, the empathy created (cf. Ramsbotham 2016; Gadamer 2010, 2013)? As we don't know the nature of al-

Zein's relation to the neighbours over whose tragic fate her tears fall, whether she witnessed or, perhaps, just heard, the story told, Schwandner-Sievers posits that 'these tears remain to a certain extent obscure unless we read [these] only very superficially through the prism of our own expectations and assumptions.'

Arguably, ethnographic films do 'not simply traverse cultural boundaries ... [but] also transcend them,' exactly by 'evoking the universality of human experience' through their focus on the particular (Taylor 1998, 19). However, participatory film, although at times referenced in the literature (Gruber 2016), is not ethnographic film, as Cooke remarks in the video. Schwandner-Sievers insists that anthropology's ontological turn highlights an inherent challenge for activist film makers, if their participatory films aspire to communicate distinct, contextually-situated meaning across different registers of curation and representation: if communication is intended to exceed mere empathy creation, reliance on images alone, hence lacking interpersonal deliberations (e.g. at film viewings), might reduce the chances of strategically promoting the changes envisaged by the activists (cf. Ramsbotham 2016).

## Conclusion

The conversation between the two ontological approaches described reveals the same aim of invoking a deeper understanding and communication between people facing differently situated realities. Yet the potentially universalising approach of cinema to provoke affective understanding through imagery alone contrasts with the anthropological focus on human diversity in specific historical contexts and the role of social interaction in communicating contextually-situated meaning. In alluding to the tensions between proximity and distance, intimacy and exploitation, the potentiality, and limitations of mediating local activists' voices and intended meaning through film alone is left up to the spectator for final arbitration.

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