



When Methods Meet: Ethnographic video and phenomenological creative writing

Arek Dakessian (University of Edinburgh) and David Manderson (University of the West of Scotland) in conversation in Edinburgh in June 2016.

In this 19-minute film two researchers who use the creative methods of ethnographic video and phenomenological creative writing discuss research methods that are characterised by an open agenda and a range of possible outcomes. Arek Dakessian and David Manderson's conversation explores the need for researchers to get close to people's experience of the phenomena that are being researched. Capturing the meaning of place by walking in an environment is one way in which a researcher may gain a sense of people's lived experience, and thus provide reassurance that an account being developed has authenticity and academic credibility. Another respect in which the film-maker's craft unexpectedly resembles that of the novelist is in not knowing at the outset where the research process will lead (although this can also be said to be true of other methods such as experiments). The conversation concludes by noting that adopting creative methods commits the researcher to the possibility of mistakes being made as imagination is followed, and these mistakes are treated as a part of the learning process.

Transcript of conversation:

AD: I do use a lot of video as part of my methodology on under a sort of ethnographic umbrella. And I try to use the camera as sort of, as either an active object, I try to get participants to engage with it and I do lots of work with youth and children.

So having a camera there is really interesting for them because they get to play around with it and they see it and they take pictures. And it's interesting that they also forget about its existence and I think once the introduction, they are introduced to the object then it's easy for them to forget about it and just get on with their everyday lives.

Which makes I think visual particularly powerful because you get to literally go back to the moment, you know, use it as a memory tool but also to see things that you possibly missed out on.

One of the reasons I was very much convinced for, towards using video was we were filming a sort of documentary, an ethnographic documentary and something happened while we were filming. So there were these two girls and their father was in the room, and we were sort of interviewing the girls and then the father interrupted and started to answer the question. But then we didn't have consent to film adults and we were just sort of filming the interview. And because of that, because of that technical sort of limitation at that point, the camera had to stay on the girls, and it was really interesting to see, when the father interrupted the girls sort of looked at each other and had the sort of subtle unspoken conversation which we didn't notice at the time, and we only noticed after months and months of sort of going over the footage, and we thought hold on a minute, those looks, they are not happenstance, there is something going on there.

For me that's one of the reasons why I am a big fan of using video, particularly when it's not intrusive.

DM: Yeah, and I suppose of course you can incorporate things like facial expression that you wouldn't see in other forms for example.

AD: Yeah.

DM: And I am just going to get my first prop, you can't actually carry this in a bag, you have to use it as a walking stick, so I was going through Edinburgh this morning using this, drawing glances, but it represents the time I took part in a collaborative project at University of the West of Scotland, and went up to Fort William and we walked along the beach of Fort William and we were to look for lines. Any sorts of lines, tracks, paths, rivers, and the shoreline etc. The project was to do with walking and how it affects us, how we can use it as a method. This set me off on a journey of looking at how to investigate places through walks. Actually it had a link to my novel writing, I just hadn't realised it at the time, and to ethnography of course, and phenomenology.

And now I am increasingly using walking as a method.

Most recently I've proposed a grant for funding to investigate walking and creative writing for early stage dementia sufferers, and there is no doubt about the fact that walking somehow restores memory, the feeling of being in a place, the feeling of connecting with the outside world. Simple things like the effect of fresh air on the brain have been proved to have a positive beneficial effect. Unsurprisingly, but it's been investigated scientifically.

So I use walking in all sorts of ways now.

I've looked at walking in fiction; I've drawn walks out from different fictional books and see how they operate in these different fictional books.

And I find that very necessary really because as an academic without something to cling onto that's your own, you can swim about and swim about in the middle of stuff and become completely lost. So it has a kind of resonance for me, as a metaphor to finding out who you are again. And that's been very valuable to me.

AD: That reminds me of one of my props, and so the donkey really resonates with the walking stick because the roads in Lebanon were sort of drawn using donkeys and donkeys are hard workers and they make their own path. I mean in a lot of ways it's very similar to academic work isn't it, you can get lost in a sea. And you start with something and then it's going to be a very long process.

DM: Yes absolutely, it's like making a map in a new place, for the first time. And one of the other concepts that I've come across is the idea of wayfaring. There is an academic called Tim Ingold, an anthropologist who says that every line is unique, you can never reproduce that line because it will never be a reproduction. And he then talks about the wayfaring routes of indigenous people and how they discovered another world through going into an unknown world and making unique routes. And how when you stop that route and it becomes a map, it's no longer unique, it's a place you travel along, you no longer wayfare.

AD: What you said about sort of ownership and finding yourself in the academy. That really resonates with me, particularly now. I think it resonates with every doctoral student, particularly when they are writing up. It's, you know, you own the things that you are writing. It's your own voice. So this is something I am going through personally at this point.

But I wonder do, how do you decide what you want to own?

DM: That's a very good question. What happened to me was that having taken part in this project where I wrote a book chapter, I then thought well what am I going to do now? You know, what would I like to work in?

I would describe it as the phenomenological approach. One places oneself in an experience as far as one can and then tries to reproduce it. You know case studies of things like poets who decide to write about surfing. They go and join the surfing community in order to write about it, they don't just look at pictures or go surfing once; they actually get right inside the whole community in order to write about what it feels like to have salt on your skin all the time and to taste it and have your hair all over the place because it's full of salt all the time. So they live it. They live it.

So that's very close to ethnography of course, but ethnography tends to observe the phenomenology places on inside.

AD: I am struck by how ethnographic that is, I mean...

DM: Yeah, it's not different, it's a huge overlap. But for creative writers, they certainly place themselves inside things and experience them.

I suppose film makers must too though. I mean I know a couple of film makers who have made films about food banks and they have had to go and work in food banks to, even just to win the trust of the people who take food from there.

So do you think that phenomenology would be something you would want to use now?

AD: What strikes me is that I think we, and it speaks a lot to interdisciplinarity as well in that you know I think we are talking about extremely similar, if not the same, but there is a very slight difference in the way we approach that experience. Or the way we name our approach our approach to that experience.

DM: I guess creative writing struggled for a long time, to be taken with any form of validity. It was very much a joke inside academia. And that's why it developed the idea of phenomenology or used phenomenology as its justification for doing what it does.

AD: What makes you decide hey this is something I am going to use?

DM: Well I suppose that's a good question.

This is a picture of a holiday that I had with my family, and that's me there, and that's my daughter there, and she was then fourteen, fifteen. I guess the reason, how you decide what

is important, is personal in that sense you know. So when I am using props in creative writing, I will ask people who participate in it, to bring along props from their lives and they will use these as starting points.

If I was my own student I would be saying write about the walk you did on this beach with your daughter and what was the meaning of that.

And once you do that, you start to trigger yourself into hundreds of different memories. And this happens to everybody. Obviously if I work with dementia people, that is a good thing because their memory will be restored and they will find it coming back to them to a certain extent. But it works for everybody. It doesn't matter about age or anything. If you start to use a personal trigger, then you get into rich material.

Would you agree that when you come to make a piece of film that you start off with the idea rather than the academic justification?

AD: One of the reasons I am a fan of sort of making academically sensitised films, I was offered this, for the documentary that we filmed in 2014 with *Lived* (name of film, reference below), we knew we had the idea, the idea was plain and simple, being co-present, participating in but also shedding light on the everyday lived experience of this lived youth, in the refugee camp, simple.

And it would normally have been a simple enough process to just get into the camp and film that sort of stuff, that's what would normally have happened I suppose, but that's not what happened at all. We spent eight months thinking it over and deconstructing it and we had so many debates, lots of heated arguments and you know film can make academic work much more accessible and public. But academic thought can make film work much more sensible and sensitive in a way and careful. Had we not taken those eight months of just doing research and then deconstructing and being reflexive and all these things, you know, I don't think it would have been as valuable a documentary as it is today.

DM: Yes, I agree, I totally agree. Universities also bring something to the process as well. I think that maybe it's an iterative process in the sense that you are constantly in dialogue between the two. And the original idea, you come back towards it at the end of it because you realise yes it was strong enough, and I've gone through this and it's grown and changed and developed but it's still the same idea really.

I did see a talk once by somebody who was involved in creative practice who said that our concept that the proposal comes first and then there is the outcome, is simply based on Aristotelian thought which is the western thought which is like well you can't start anything until you know what you are going to do, so you better tell us what you are going to do first.

How the hell are you going to know what you are going to do until you are at the end of it? That's particularly resonant with novel writers who don't have a clue, well most of them don't have a clue what they are going to finish up with at the end.

AD: One of the things I come across often is that well you can't really discuss methodology in a film, well you can, it's just done differently, it brings back to sort of this methodological things about reflexivity and I find that these things are quite present in films and I think it's just an issue of learning to read them out of the film.

But going back to this whole film versus text – I think it would be nice to have some form of sort of recognition of creative outcomes. Because not recognising them means sort of

completely ignoring their academic value which is absolutely not the case, they do have value, academic value.

I think that would be a good step to take at some point and I mean you seem to have, you seem to be doing that quite a lot,

DM: Let me tell you about the work of one of my other PhD students who is writing a novel based on fragments, photographs, a bit of a film, little mementos like a shoelace, and she is invested in getting her grandmother's story, who was Jewish. Her grandmother came to Scotland and married a traveller in the 1940s and left behind in Germany a young girl, a daughter. And it's that girl's story that is being investigated now. My student is using the fragments of that little girl's life, documentation, transportation to Auschwitz, all sorts of things, just fragments to build a life in what she calls creative non-fiction which means that she is imagining much of this, but she is imagining it in such a way that is real. Do you know what I mean? We can't say that it's unreal.

AD: That's really fascinating,

DM: Well the reference in terms of theory is post-memory. The idea of memory after the event is particularly associated with trauma. If you can say to students at any level, there is a way of looking at the world which is not just what you see in front of you but conceptually they become engaged in a deeper way.

AD: And like you said methods are conducive to that. When you use a method, you learn from it. Sort of like a cycle.

DM: Yes it's a cycle, yeah absolutely. Somebody called it a nexus recently in an article I was reading. So the use of creative writing outside the discipline of creative writing is very fruitful. This technique has been used with managers and with nurses. Nurses are very interesting because the lecturer who introduced it said we are trying to teach students values rather than medicine. So they made them write about their patients from the patient's point of view.

The methodology that we use to justify it was the Situationists and their idea of the *dérive* (see references to *Debord* below), and wandering through urban space and diagnosing its emotional truth from observation, which they later rejected, because how can you make such a thing scientific. But nevertheless in other ways it works very well.

AD: Sometimes you know it's nice to, it's nice to not only change the way you expect a student to think about an essay but also to change the method of the essay. These ingrained disciplinary methodological traditions can constrain research, can constrain the researcher. And I think a lot of the times one of the reasons why it's nice to, it's nice to teach students different ways and innovative ways, is you can ask a question with different methods and it's useful to think about why are you using this particular method, or that particular method?

Or whether in fact could you answer that question in a better way through a different creative method?

I know quite a few doctoral researchers nowadays using emotional maps, using art therapy, using creative drawing with children and stuff. And we are not trained to think of these creative or innovative methods. We are not trained to think about them in the first instance, they come to us after a lot of time and energy spent on finding a different way because you know we have these go to methods, which is fair enough and absolutely. But sometimes it is worth getting out of it and getting out of that box and the methods are not like, it's not a shop

where I can go and take methods. It's methods, methods are tools that I can make my own. I have ownership over the method as well.

And that's why I think these conversations are really interesting because you, I mean we use similarish methods on one level, but on a different level they are completely different.

I mean phenomenology and ethnography, I mean they are similar but then I mean they are not as well.

DM: Yes.

AD: And I think what is nice about these conversations is that you know it does show that you can make your methods your own as well. Your research question is your own, your thesis is your own, your methods should be your own as well and whatever works for your question.

DM: Yes, yeah and I think the value of experimentation has to be remembered to, you know, a lot of the creative writing theory would say well we are in a lab here, we are not actually knowing the answer. We don't know the answer to what we are going to do yet. We are going to try a number of experiments, it's very important that we make mistakes. Don't be scared to make mistakes, if you don't make any mistakes you are not going to get anywhere.

Just the idea of the relief of doing it a different way opens up something else. And possibly what happens then is that you realise that what you've gone on to do as an experiment is actually part of the methodology anyway, it's part of the method. You just didn't realise it until that moment. So there is this constant expansion of exploring the method as well which is part of that. But I think you have to do something different every now and again, you just have to. Instead of writing about it pick a camera up and go away and take some pictures of it. And I am sure it will work.

AD: My best friend and I would Skype frequently when I was on fieldwork, once a week or once every two weeks, first it was a nice sort of "escape" from my fieldwork and then after a while I realised well hold on a minute I am in my Skype conversations with her, I am making sense of a lot of things. And so I asked her, can I start recording these, and so now I have as part of my data I have a lot of conversations about flat hunting and that sort of,

DM: Yes for sure, that's also part of it,

AD: That's part of it, and yeah, that's fascinating stuff.

Contributors

Arek Dakessian is PhD candidate at the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. His websites (personal and project) are:

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Dr David Manderson is Lecturer in Creative Writing in the School of Media, Culture and Society at University of West of Scotland. His webpage is <http://www.uws.ac.uk/staff-profiles/mcs/david-manderson/>

References and further reading:

The following are recent contributions to the discussion of the methods, and they all contain bibliographies that provide suggestions for further reading.

Video Ethnography:

This is a great book for engaging with the versatility of video as method. The first chapter is particularly interesting for those thinking about video ethnography:

M. Broth, E. Laurier and L. Mondada, (Eds.), *Studies of video practices: video at work*, *Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies*. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York ; London 2014)

E. Margolis and L. Pauwels, *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (SAGE 2011)

P.D. Milne, C. Mitchell and N. de Lange, *Handbook of Participatory Video*, (AltaMira Press, 2012)

S. Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, (SAGE Publications: London, 2007)

This paper is not directly relevant to video ethnography, but speaks to 'making methods your own':

L. Young and H. Barrett, 'Adapting visual methods: action research with Kampala street children', in *Area* 33, 141–152. doi:10.1111/1475-4762.00017 (2001)

Another interesting resource is the journal of video ethnography (JVE). This is a fairly recent, peer-reviewed journal with a filmic focus on ethnographic video and film. It's not in the REF, but it's still a very useful resource. (<http://www.videoethno.com>)

Creative writing:

J. Webb, *Researching Creative Writing*, (Frontinus: Suffolk 2015)

J. Kroll and K. Harper, *Researching Creative Writing*, (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2013)

L. Barrett and D. Manderson, 'Making the Ordinary Extraordinary: Collaborative Wayfaring and Creative Writing' in *Exploring Creative Writing: Voices from the Great Writing International Great Writing Conference*, pp.49-66 (Cambridge Scholars: Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016)

G. Harper, *New Writing: the International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*. (Rutledge: London)

National Association of Writers in Education, subject lead website, <http://www.nawe.co.uk>

G. Debord, *Psychogeographic Guide to Paris* (1957)
<http://imaginarymuseum.org/LPG/Mapsitu1.htm> Accessed 9 October 2016

G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. (Black and Red: New York 1984)

Suggested questions for seminar discussion:

Video Ethnography:

Is it necessary for a researcher to have prior experience with video to conduct video ethnographies?

What can video contribute to ethnography?

What constitutes 'video ethnography'? Or what would an ethnography look like using video?

What would be some of the ethical considerations of incorporating video to ethnography?

What are some of the advantages and pitfalls of conducting video ethnographies?

Creative Writing:

What research situations might creative writing be used in, other than video and walking?

What is 'creative writing'? What kinds of writing cannot be said to be 'creative'?

What might be the ethical pitfalls to a phenomenological approach to research?

How might creative writing be used in a mixed methods approach to research with other non-arts disciplines?

How might phenomenological approaches influence a work of fiction, with no relation whatsoever to the academy?