

Visual archives, digitized visions, ethnography

Alessandra Gribaldo



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/anuac/706>

ISSN: 2239-625X

Publisher

Società italiana di antropologia culturale

Printed version

Number of pages: 171-180

Electronic reference

Alessandra Gribaldo, "Visual archives, digitized visions, ethnography", *Anuac* [Online], 13 | 2024, Online since 30 June 2024, connection on 30 July 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/anuac/706>



The text only may be used under licence CC BY 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Visual archives, digitized visions, ethnography

Alessandra GRIBALDO

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Katherine GROO | *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 364; **Catherine RUSSELL** (ed. by) | *Sensing the Archive. Exploring the digital (im)materiality of the moving image archive*. “Frames Cinema Journal”. Issue 19, Spring 2022, pp. 332; **Ernst KAREL** and **Veronika KUSUMARYATI** | *Expedition Content*, 2020, 78’.

Archives of nonfiction moving images and the possibilities that open upon digitization have recently been the subject of reflections, showing profound relevance for ethnography and anthropology¹. Film archives emerge as rich spaces for dialogue with the discipline in pace with the ever-changing conditions of technologies and intellectual and political positions of archivists and researchers. Several film scholars have recently grappled with issues involving the historical ethnographic dimension and its filmic outcomes.

Among them, Katherine Groo, with *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive*, has produced a dense and fascinating work on the early films called “ethnographic” and their history and circulation. These are peculiar artifacts that hardly lend themselves to cataloging, and are pieces of “bad” or undisciplined cinema: indefinable, untitled and unauthored, suspended between academia, museum, colonial government, and personal archive. The

-
1. The reflection around which this review article is structured is developed within the projects: “Archivi audiovisivi amatoriali e memorie familiari” (FAR 2023) and “80MM. From private to public memoirs in the family film archives of Modena”, (FAR-FOMO 2023) University of Modena and Reggio Emilia.

author proposes a reading of these moving images from the turn of the century - often discovered by chance, uncatalogued or unused, and primarily analyzed in the literature through the key of racialization - which allows lingering on the images and footage, attempting to dig further meanings, working on the absences and discards.

These films often harbor what the scholar describes as a suspension: “a distinct lack of epistemological certainty rather than a clear expression of ideological force or a stable difference between spectators and subjects-on-screen” (p. 4). Groo, a film historian, claims a history of images that does not hide its theoretical and metahistorical commitments. Referring to feminist film scholarship, the author insists on the possibility of investigating the subject and rethinking historicity itself with its eventful chronology, starting from the margins. The fact that these footages were not screened at the time of their production requires special attention, and their fragile and fragmentary qualities, as well as everyday contexts, call into question the idea of the ethnographic archive itself, an archive of everything and nothing in particular. These visual documents - identified as expressions of a dark age of visual anthropology - are reread with a fresh look by Groo. Hunted animals, for example, feature prominently in cinematic expeditions: as the author suggests, their slaughter and dismemberment on screen, while blurring the boundaries between ethnographic and zoographic categories of otherness, also provide the images for the death drive of the ethnographic archive, which binds preservation and destruction, as mentioned by Derrida (1995). The author points out how the absence of humans in these films paradoxically commits these “animal others” to the history of anthropology and anthropological thought.

The book explores the relationship between written and visual ethnographic practices and their connection to cinema, which leads Groo to speak of “the ethnographic underbelly” (p. 49) of the *Maison Lumière*. By comparing different documents, such as the *Village Ashanti* series, filmed at the 1897 Colonial Exposition in Lyon, and the Lumière films *Repas de Bébé* (France, 1895) and *Repas d’Indiens* (Mexico, 1896), the author questions the coherence and stability of the notion of the ethnographic film archive. The pages devoted to Albert Kahn’s *Archives de la Planète* - a huge 20-year (1909-1931) utopian project aiming to create a world visual archive - reveal an alternative history of French modernity and are particularly effective in identifying a series of fracture lines that mark this peculiar archive and those who conceived and built it: “the amateur and the human geographer; the individual path and the collective

pattern; the utopian imagination and positivist science; the visual surface and temporal depth; the natural world and the political domain” (p. 80).

Groo returns to what she calls “excursive films” to find in these images an exit from a clear meaning and the archivable, emphasizing a sort of transgression that goes beyond both naive positivist interpretations and the idea of a counter-archive (Amad 2010), teaching us how to see differently (Strathern 2013). Groo’s reflection allows articulation of the relationship between cinema and ethnography by exploring the dimensions of authorship, randomness, and what falls outside the realm of the already seen, uneven topographies and landscapes: “Ethnographic cinema is precisely the kind of incomplete or partial document that neither ethnography nor film historiography can accommodate” (p. 210). These unauthored films do not fill in the gaps in ethnographic film history; rather, they act as haunting ghosts.

A more recent reflection on the use of archives has been edited by Catherine Russell, a scholar well known for her work on experimental ethnography and the visual archive (1999, 2018). While the authors of the essays are not anthropologists and the journal hosting the curatorship is specialized in film studies, the papers certainly have relevance to rethink moving image archives in ethnographic terms, starting from the neologism coined by Russell herself, “archiveology”. The articles deal with different experiences in the research and critical processing of filmed documents, ranging from the reinterpretation of the work of historical amateur cinema artists (Rho, Lallouz), contemporary artists (Rémy), artists working through the algorithms of an (im)possible online digital archive (Willis), to reflections on the online circulation of homemade media (Berliner), on more specific political issues involving filmed and unused journalistic footages of the Bosnian war (van Oldenborgh), and the work of Colombian visual artists confronting archival moving images and found footage on the country’s violent history (Vélez-Serna).

One element that recurs in the various contributions is the ghostly and uncanny dimension of archival images, which echoes Groo’s reflections. Chew’s and Löffler’s essays, in particular, explore this dimension with an ethnographic sensibility. “Hauntological thickening” is the expression used by May Chew to address the extent to which visual archives can also and sometimes especially speak of absences, of what is missing and keeps interrogating visual evidence and the archival form itself. Exploring two participatory projects of diasporic archives of migrant and indigenous black people in Canada, Chew insists on the possibilities of counter-archives that challenge the assumptions

of neutrality, order, and completeness demanded by the archival form and critically interrogate the legibility and visibility of images. The alternating quality of found footage images, with its inaccuracies, jumps, and glitches, hints at the hesitant status of the film archive. Petra Löffler enters the visual logic governing early ethnographic expeditions that coincide temporally with the dawn of cinema. The digitization of early ethnographic films makes this - often scattered and unused - material a new source of critical reflection: in her analysis of 11 minutes of footage of the “Hamburger Südsee-Expedition” from 1908 to 1910 in German New Guinea, the scholar makes the images speak to the archived written documents. Löffler points out the abrupt and unintentional shift of the camera away from the ritual performed by six masked men and the shot of the audience of natives and Westerners witnessing it, thereby illuminating the blind spot that reveals the negotiation with the natives and the staging of the ritual. The poor condition of the film and the unexpected shot emphasize the ghostly appearance of bodies, glances, and everyday life and point at what the author calls the “spectral longevity” of the film, made by the desire to preserve a past doomed to disappearance.

A similar sensibility can be found in a recent documentary that has not yet been distributed in Italy: *Expedition Content* (2020). Unsettling and extremely fascinating and magnetic, exploring the theme of the moving image archive and ethnography further. The screen is almost always black, while the substance is provided by sound. One hour and eighteen minutes of darkness. The nature of cinema, which involves watching, being silent, and being captured by the screen, implies in this case the displacement of a denied vision. The two filmmakers, anthropologist Veronika Kusumaryati and sound artist Ernst Karel from the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, had access to a sound archive consisting of 37 hours, produced in 1961 by a young researcher, Michael Rockefeller, donated by his sister to the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 2006 and recently digitized. Four years of intensive listening and editing work resulted in what might be described as a peculiar sound archive montage, a work of experimental ethnography, an attempt to decolonize the anthropological gaze. The recordings were made in Dutch New Guinea (present-day West Papua) during the filming of the well-known ethnographic film *Dead Birds* (1963) by anthropologist and filmmaker Robert Gardner about the Hubula. This population was classified as “uncontacted” until 30 years earlier in the Baliem Valley. The six-month Harvard Peabody Expedition, involving an all-male team of anthropologists and artists funded

by the then Dutch colonial government and private donations, produced two photographic books, a popular text, and two ethnographic monographs in addition to the film.

The role of the 24-year-old Rockefeller, a Harvard graduate, and nephew of Nelson Rockefeller (at the time New York governor and later vice president of the United States), was to record sounds that could be used for the documentary, as the noisy 16mm camera prevented synchronous recordings. However, his work becomes something else, and *Expedition Content* gives us the grain of it: sounds of insects, rainfall, moments of work, daily life, singing, intimate discussions, and tracks that mostly turned out to be unusable in the documentary they were destined to. The editing of the sound archive by Kusumaryati and Karel is by no means naturalistic. The recorded tracks are minutely anticipated by Rockefeller's voice announcing the date, place, and brief description: his voice, extremely close to the microphone, comes across as intimate, hesitant, almost a personal diary, producing an odd effect on the listener. Indeed, this sound is literally what is left out of the grand androcentric narrative of *Dead Birds*. While the film by Gardner focuses on the image of a population occupied primarily by war activities, *Expedition Content* returns a very different picture, where the voices of women and children, improvised conversations, and sounds related to daily activities, horticulture, and cooking are preponderant.

The filmmakers choose to make little use of on-screen texts (at the beginning there is a very brief description of the expedition and its outcomes), and to translate only a portion of the natives' words. Some passages remain obscure to the listener, and the filmmakers work on the ambivalence of the audience's gaze, both attracted and disturbed at the same time by the lack of understanding. Among the translated words is an exchange between Rockefeller and a woman rinsing potatoes. She laughs, teasing him in her language ("Hey, little brother, how did you get here? See how we cut sweet potatoes?" the translation goes) and asks him not to get too close, to keep a distance, her voice far from scared. When the natives invite him to sing, Michael plays along. And the minstrel song he sings tells more than many words and images. As does the comment of two little boys who whisper about the presence of the whites, which they find bespectacled, cocky, and dangerous, in a dynamic that is evidently about playing with each other and keeping their distance from outsiders.

Two moments of the vision are disturbing: the blackness of the screen is interrupted only for a couple of minutes when a scene - taken from *Dead Birds* - shows a cave, some fire, and silhouettes of people. The viewer struggles to focus and is left disarmed by the images: the vision of darkness and the sounds we have been accustomed to, allow a hesitation about the meaning of that visual fragment. A sort of *image-déchirure* (Didi-Huberman 2003) that makes the viewers suddenly feel “seen” in a sonic documentary that plays with the articulation of darkness with sound and makes us look at the sound and hear the image.

In another moment of the film, we realize that we are witnessing something unsettling: the conversation, this time in English, is carried on among the field researchers, presumably drunk, who, during a party in their camp, plunge into racist speeches, discuss jazz mocking blacks’ accent, express vulgarities about native women. We hear: “Is that on, Michael? Tell the truth!”. We do not know whether the fact of keeping the tape recorder on signifies a taking of distance or perhaps just the realization that every sound deserves to be recorded regardless of who produces it, from native songs to roaring rains to the private conversations of white men belonging to America’s privileged class. In any case, that recording track is a key to this documentary, which reveals itself as being not only about exotic gazes but also colonial violence - involving the Netherlands, Indonesia, and the United States - and cultural erasure, asking our eyes to look at darkness. The film opens with a conversation between Gardner and his fellow explorers about what character the *Dead Birds* documentary will have, the colors, the saturation, the light, and the grain of the film, which should come across as natural, and as true as possible. “I think if there’s only one thing that the expedition can do is hope to create reality or a sense of reality”, declares one voice. It is precisely this neutrality that Kusumaryati and Karel question, so the various levels of colonial violence the expedition implied can emerge.

The involvement of anthropologists and native artists with whom Kusumaryati has been working for years, in a territory that suffers from Indonesian military presence and the pressure of economic and political interests, has raised an engagement about remembrance and preservation of language expressions no longer used, as well as traditions and music. It is precisely the ghostly dimension that connotes this film. It is not only about highlighting the power dynamics in the field, the racism, and machismo of the expedition but also a whole mystique of the ethnography of the other. The forgotten,

the unheard, the deemed irrelevant voices and sounds of women and children come back to haunt the expedition and its scientific products.

Michael himself, a figure with an unwieldy surname, as evidenced by a few lines in the film, is the protagonist of a story that sees him disappear a few months after the recordings. During a further trip into the territory in search of “primitive art” objects he had fallen in love with during a break in Gardner’s documentary filming, his catamaran, evidently overloaded with material, capsizes: the anthropologist who was with him is rescued; of the young Rockefeller, who tried to reach the shore after two days waiting on the wreck, there will be no further trace. Tales of his end proliferated: dead among the waters, rescued by the natives and left among them, eaten by “cannibals”.

A film without images, playing between visible and invisible, listenable and incomprehensible, translated and untranslated, image and sound, *Expedition Content* is about the disappearance, survival, predatory violence, colonial-brand ethnography, the anthropology of a sound archive, and the ambivalence and turmoil of the ever-present history of ethnographic work. As Groo reminds us:

In ethnography, one leaves the center to chase (hunt, follow) the periphery; one supplements the living, breathing, speaking self with writing, photographs, and cinema. In ethnography, one also loses precise disciplinary tools for bricolage, a system of inadequate and imprecise substitutions. One writes what one hears. One films what cannot be seen. One takes what one can get and puts it all on-screen (p. 207).

There is a growing interest from the social sciences in the archive, opening unexplored avenues for the anthropological work on visual and sound documents as a heterotopian archive. Groo’s book, Russel’s edited issue, and Kusumaryati and Karel’s film aim to decenter images, anthropology, and ethnographic practice. There is hope for more confrontation of cinema and visual studies with anthropological approaches about ethnographic archives of moving images: these are spaces where anthropological theory and ethnographic reflection can contribute decisively to rethink the instabilities and contingencies of visual archives, an ethnographic exercise on the archive and from the archive.

REFERENCES

- Amad, Paula, 2010, *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques, 1995, *Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne*, Paris, Éditions Galilée.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges, 2003, *Images malgré tout*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Russell, Catherine, 1999, *Experimental Ethnography. The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Russell, Catherine, 2018, *Archiveology. Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn, 2013, *Learning to see in Melanesia. Four lectures given in the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, 1993–2008*, Chicago, Hau Books.

Alessandra GRIBALDO is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Her main interests are gender and feminist theory, anthropology of kinship and reproduction, the intersection of image and gender, intimate partner violence, ethnography. Author of *Unexpected Subjects. Intimate Partner Violence, Testimony and the Law*, Hau Books, 2021, her latest research project concerns an anthropology of family films.

alessandra.gribaldo@unimore.it



