

PARTICIPATORY VIDEO AND DESIGN: EXAMPLES FROM THE BESPOKE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

As anthropologists work to enable the participation of “subjects” in the co-creation of ethnographic insight, participatory media has increasingly been used in order to creatively produce and disseminate experience. In this paper we draw on both design and anthropological literature to contextualise the experience of the Bespoke Project, a community-centred design project in the UK.

As part of Bespoke, community members in two disadvantaged areas were asked to contribute videos about life in the area, which was in turn viewed by a design team who used the material for contextual information and inspiration to create bespoke designs. Here, we consider the contribution that participatory video can make to the process of design ethnography, and the challenges and benefits of this methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Within anthropology, the use of film¹ to both produce and reflect ethnographic insight has a long and much-theorised history (Banks 2001; Crawford & Turton 1992; Hockings 2003). Building on ethnographic filmmaking and facilitated by changes in technology, visual anthropologists over the past three decades have increasingly explored the use of participatory filmmaking as a means of co-creating meaning with ethnographic informants (Ginsburg 1991; Michaels 1986; Turner 1991).

As design ethnographers, interaction designers and Human Computer Interaction professionals consider different modes of sharing and reflecting on ethnographic insight within design processes, film has emerged as a rich multi-sensory and uniquely expressive methodology (Brun-Cottan & Wall 1995; Raijmakers et al. 2006; Raijmakers 2007). Acknowledging the distinctive features of filmmaking that particularly lend themselves to design – in particular its sensory, multi-vocal and reflexive qualities – in this paper

we consider the possibilities for incorporating participatory filmmaking into design practice.

To demonstrate the lineage for participatory film work in design, we draw on both anthropological and design literature. Accepting that film is both a process and a product that not only *exhibits* but also *creates* insight (MacDougall 2006) we explore how participant-produced moving image can not only be incorporated into the process of creating design ideas, but can also facilitate reflection during a prototype or deployment stage. In order to illustrate this discussion, we discuss the specific example of the Bespoke Project (www.bespokeproject.org), which is currently underway in Preston, UK. A multi-disciplinary research project conducted in partnership between five UK universities, Bespoke is specifically testing the method of using community-generated video as a way of not only informing design ideas, but also facilitating processes of community-centred design throughout multiple iterations.

FILMMAKING AS ETHNOGRAPHY

Margaret Mead was one of the first proponents of using filmmaking as a tool for ethnography. Mead saw moving image as an ideal recording device,

able to collect a vast amount of objective ethnographic data that could be “repeatedly reanalysed with finer tools and developing theories” (Mead 2003: 10). Mead’s husband and sometimes research partner Gregory Bateson, however, was more transparent in his discussion of the process of selection inherent in the use of visual methods and saw film less as an objective device and more as a relational and partial process (Jacknis 1988). Bateson acknowledged that through framing a composition, or even in choosing to film one interaction or moment in favour of another, the person capturing the image implicitly prioritises and organises the world of the participant being filmed. As John Berger later commented, this process of mediated “looking” is inherently partial, for when we look at a captured image later we are subtly aware of the selection of “that sight from an infinity of other possible sights” (1972: 10).

Rather than reducing the utility within ethnographic practice, acknowledging the inherent subjectivity of filmmaking is increasingly seen as a benefit of the medium. As anthropology has developed, there has been mounting calls for incorporating new methods like filmmaking which allow for experimenting with different forms of communicating ethnographic understanding beyond text (Grimshaw 2001). Film, in particular, has been viewed as offering a unique potential for reflexivity, in revealing aspects of the ethnographic process itself (Ruby 2000) and in fundamentally creating not just an objective “copy of the world out there but someone’s statement about the world” (Worth 1980: 20). Film is not simply an all-seeing eye, a meta note-taking device as Mead initially conceived of it, but a subjective and inflected process of arbitrating and communicating meaning, both in making and viewing. Key to this is understanding filmmaking both as a *process* and a *product* – relationships are formed and insight is gathered both in the putting together of a film (in shooting and in editing) as well as in later viewing and discussing it.

One of the unique properties of moving-image, as opposed to still photography, is this relational quality, in particular the capacity for multi-vocality. In addition to laying bare the filmmakers

own presence in the creation of the film, films are able to facilitate what Marcus and Fischer termed “ethnographic poetics” through an interweaving of voices, experiences and viewpoints in accordance with the collaborative nature of ethnography (1986). As anyone who has ever tried to film a group discussion or even family meal can attest, using film in the place of written text allows for the preservation of the messy cacophony of daily life, or as Rajmakers et al. (2006) describe, to keep the “erratic, elusive fabric of the everyday intact” (229). Equally, multi-vocality can be extended to not only reconcile multiple voices of subjects, but also the ethnographer’s own commentary or narration (the films of David and Judith MacDougall or Jean Rouch are good examples of this).

In preserving a multiplicity of metaphorical and literal “voices,” films are able to operate on several sensory registers simultaneously. While taste and smell are not generally incorporated into filmmaking (1960s smell-o-vision and John Waters experiments notwithstanding), audio and video are essential interwoven aspects of both filmmaking and film viewing. The video camera is an extension of the sensory engagement of both the filmmaker and the subject, as MacDougall writes, “we see with our bodies, and any image we make carries the imprint of our bodies” (2006: 3). Films allow us to focus and direct our embodied sensory engagement. Rather than simply “being-in-the-world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962) the act of filmmaking, through its selectivity, focuses attention on specific aspects of the world around us.

THE GROWTH OF COMMUNITY MEDIA

Anthropologist Sol Worth and filmmaker John Adair conducted arguably one of the first “experiments” in indigenous media with the Navajo Nation in the late 1960s (Worth & Adair 1972). They gave film cameras to their Navajo informants in order to see whether a different form of filmic lexicon would emerge to correspond with the Navajo language and grammar system. Since then, studies of how and why indigenous groups use forms of media has become a central concern within visual anthropology. In particular, anthro-

pologists have examined how media can act as a new avenue for “internal and external communication, for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination” (Ginsburg 1991: 92). A key finding has often been that processes of media cannot be divorced from the social context in which they are performed, and that “media worlds” are deeply embedded and culturally inflected at the same time as they can be globally referential (Ginsburg et al. 2002).

Although Indigenous Media has received significant attention in anthropology over the past thirty years, processes of participatory media have by no means been limited to indigenous groups. Halleck (2002) and Boyle (1997) both chronicle the vibrant community media movement in the US which grew out of the activist politics of the 1960s. Informed by the educational philosophy of Critical Pedagogy (Friere 1993), media activists began to work with communities in order to use media as a collaborative process through which, ultimately, structures of power could be questioned.

Over time, community media came to be seen as a “the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community” (Berrigan 1979 quoted in Carpentier 2003: 426), premised on the idea that if people were collaborators in choosing how and where they were to be depicted, that the results would be more accurate and nuanced than the process of outsiders coming in. There has been increasing interest in using participatory media as a means of inviting participation, both within academic research (Loizos 2000; Pink 2007) as well as in applied settings ranging from international development (Frohlich et al. 2009, Lunch & Lunch 2006) to human rights activism (Gregory 2005).

Institutionally, even large-scale cultural organisations like the BBC in the UK have incorporated participatory media, for instance in the examples of the BBC’s *Video Nation or Capture Wales* projects which asked viewers to contribute content about their daily lives (Carpentier 2003). A similar emphasis on participatory content creation using visual media is used by advocates of “digital storytelling” (Lundby 2008). Outside of facilitated research and institutional contexts, “ordinary

people” are creating and sharing their own “content” without necessarily being invited or told to do so. Allan and Thorsen (2009), for instance, describe the rise of “citizen journalism” which is changing the nature of how news information is created and disseminated, and participatory media outlets such as YouTube are seen as fundamentally altering the ways in which individuals create, consume and circulate media (Burgess & Green 2010).

However, while considerable enthusiasm has been generated around community media, Thumim (2007) sounds an important note of caution. In her study of two large-scale participatory media projects she notes that while there are wide claims made for self-representation avoiding, or at least lessening the “pitfalls of mediation,” nonetheless, “self-representations are always mediated... [and] exactly how they are mediated is of crucial importance: (2007: 52). Thumim’s research on the representation of “ordinary people” cautions against viewing community media overly triumphantly, as if giving people video cameras to own or operate themselves somehow magically mitigates against power relationships or researcher/filmmaker control. These theoretical and empirically-grounded studies of video as both researcher-led and participatory *processes* and *products* provide important context to understanding the use of participatory video within the Bespoke project. In the following section, we turn to the specific example of Bespoke and suggest how the use of video within Bespoke provides an opportunity to see both the unique benefits and challenges of participatory video at work within a research context. The project is still underway, so this discussion will give shape to some of the further research activities as we enter into the final stage of completion.

CONTEXT OF THE BESPOKE PROJECT

The history of community and indigenous media outlined briefly above provides important context to the Bespoke project. While designers have begun to incorporate filmmaking into their praxis, Bespoke is exploring whether participatory media can be utilised within a design process. Bespoke is

funded through the UK national Economic and Physical Sciences Research Council, under the *Digital Economy* strand, and has as its wider objective the exploration of how digital design can benefit under-resourced communities. To that end, we are pursuing a process of community-centred design (as opposed to individual user-centred or small-group centred design). Here, community-centred design is defined as *a design philosophy and process in which the differing needs, wants and limitations of community members are given extensive attention at each stage of the design process.*

Community-centred design is a design methodology that requires attention to the specificity of a local environment, and a detailed knowledge of the key stakeholders, issues and debates. Importantly, community-centred design requires a different form of methodology than traditional user-centred design in that we need to move past requirements of specific users and towards and understanding of the community-level use ecology that the designs will eventually become part of. This includes not only questions of metaphorical “power” within the community but also more prosaic questions of “power” – for instance in considering how we will access electricity in public spaces to power our designs. Of equally central importance is acknowledging and resolving the sometimes competing and even conflicting needs of different stakeholders.

The specific context of the Bespoke project is the area of the Fishwick Ward in the city of Preston, a post-industrial city in the North of England. Within the Fishwick Ward are two contiguous neighbourhoods called Callon and Fishwick, Callon was built in the 1930s and mainly comprises semidetached housing controlled for the most part by two housing associations (Contour and Community Gateway) but there is some private ownership. Fishwick is directly next to Callon but is composed mainly of 19th century terraced housing and has a more ethnically diverse resident community than Callon which is largely “White British.”

Bespoke was located in Callon and Fishwick for several reasons. Primary amongst these was the fact that the research centre at one of the partnering

universities, the University of Central Lancashire, had previously worked with community associations successfully in the area. Equally, there was an interest in media representation pre-existing in the area – locals had been depicted quite poorly in the past (for example being featured in the *Neighbours from Hell* TV programme and being labelled “race hate capital of Britain”). Importantly, for a community-centred design project, there was an identified *need* for further development of the “digital economy” – according to the most recently available UK Home Office statistics people living in Callon and Fishwick were considered as among the 10% most deprived in the UK. Though the situation in these areas has improved in part due to ongoing regeneration projects, it was felt that there was ample scope to develop a project in this area, and strong contacts to build upon.

The project developed a methodology of participatory media that we entitled “community journalism.” Led locally by a team of two researchers with applied backgrounds in journalistic practice, it was felt that this title encapsulated the documentary and investigative ethos of the media process to be included within Bespoke. Equally, the term “journalist” called up the emerging practice of “citizen journalism” and of local residents depicting their own realities through film. The project team therefore includes designers from a variety of disciplines (including craft, electrical and product design, interaction design and Human Computer Interaction) as well as two journalists and one anthropologist.

This paper is indicative of this multidisciplinary methodology. Primarily, the findings are a result of ethnographic “action research” on the Bespoke project itself, based on methods including participant-observation in project sessions, focus group discussions and interviews with designers, journalists and local residents, and analysis of the videos created during the project. However, the other researchers have been given an opportunity to comment and to shape the perspectives presented here based on their own areas of expertise. This paper specifically explores the method of using participatory media (here called interchangeably “com-



Figure 1: The Bespoke website with a map of the local area and embedded text and videos

munity journalism”) as a way of creating and sharing ethnographic insights as part of a community centred-design process. Ultimately, this process will result in the construction of bespoke digital designs for use by the Callon and Fishwick communities. As the designs are still in progress, and the scope of this paper is methodological, we will therefore spend little time on the actual designs here, but will give some indication as to the direction the designs are taking.

THE BESPOKE PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The Bespoke project is a pilot initiative developing the method of community journalism as a means to conduct community-centred design. We have been working with residents and users of the Callon and Fishwick areas over a period of eighteen months, and have adopted a flexible methodology in order to capitalise on new contacts, local events, and partner initiatives in the area. The Bespoke project has involved two stages, in the first year while the

community journalism was being set up, the design team adopted a process of using more traditional design ethnography and workshop-based community engagement to produce three prototypes that have been deployed in the local area. Here, we concentrate on the second year of the Bespoke project which has piloted the process of using community journalism to create ethnographic insight. This has resulted in a more efficient process for the design team, but less direct community engagement.

In this time, Bespoke has worked with community members to produce a range of “old” (a local newspaper) and “new” media outputs (a series of videos presented on a website tied very specifically to the local area). For the purposes of this paper, we will concentrate largely on the videos produced as part of the project, as these have featured more heavily in the design process. While the designers have read and engaged with the newspaper, this has provided more of a background context whereas the videos have been the subject of more detailed project conversation.

Initially, we asked local residents to contribute a text or video about life in the area with little preconditions. However, as the process has evolved we have worked more closely with a designated group of “community journalists” who are participating in a paid scheme for long-term unemployed Preston residents. These journalists have been given training and are part of a facilitated and supported scheme

led by the Contour housing association. This targeted approach has garnered more substantive and consistent content, whereas the more general approach initially undertaken didn’t produce a significant response. The more specialised engagement has greatly benefited the project in producing a more substantive amount of journalistic output and in linking with a highly-relevant community scheme, but also has its limitations in presenting a limited range of voices, and in reflecting the priorities of the housing association. Thus far, the methodology for developing journalism to feed into the design process has been as follows:

1. Community journalists produce video stories about life in the area
2. Designers watch the videos and talk to journalists about their experiences
3. Designers think of questions about the area which are fed back to an “editor” who designs briefs for the journalists
4. The journalists produce further material following the briefs
5. The designers come up with design ideas
6. The journalists produce further reports in relationship to the design ideas
7. The designers create selected digital product prototypes for deployment
8. Journalists report back on prototype deployments

Table 1: Bespoke community journalism methodology

The designers watched, read and listened to the initial round of community journalism outputs and discussed some of the recurring themes that were raised across many of the different outputs. For instance, many of the journalists’ videos, articles and interviews focused on the lack of communication between community groups in the local area, the importance of local green spaces, worries about crime, or the fact that many residents felt disenfranchised from formal politics because they didn’t feel listened to. As a result of viewing and discussing the journalists output, the designers produced five initial design ideas. These included: the *Log-a-jog* device for recording run-



Figure 2: Interviews with local residents (video still)

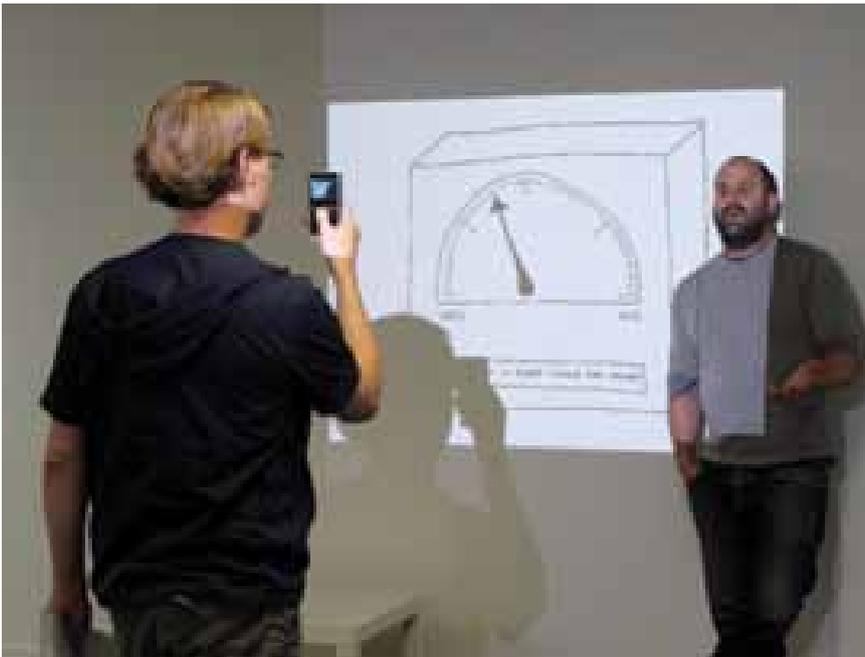


Figure 3: Community journalist interviewing a designer at the press conference

ning times in the local park using RFID readers, the *Viewpoint* which enables residents to input into local issues, the *Wayfinder* which advertises local events and geo-locates them, the Home Screens that act as a portal to connect households in the local area, and an interactive *Community Radio*.

The designers then held a press conference for the community journalists, to explain the ideas and invite questions and clarification. The journalists subsequently contributed to a “design special issue” of the local newspaper and conducted a series of audio and video interviews about the design ideas. The designers gathered together again to review this material and decided to prototype two of the ideas based on this feedback, the *Viewpoint* and the *Wayfinder* (described below). As the designs are prototyped and later deployed, the journalism process will also be used to feedback on the designs themselves, and how they fit within the wider ecology of users and services in the area.

REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

In this final section, we describe some of the challenges and benefits that have been suggested by this unique methodology in light of the theoretical and empirical work on video in design and participatory media described above. These findings are based on ethnogra-

phy of the project process, incorporating the experiences of both designers and journalists.

The challenges of using community journalism as a means of conducting community-centred design have been both practical and epistemological. Although participatory media has sometimes been lauded as a way of ameliorating some of the power differential between researcher and researched (Kendon 2003), the complicated relationship between the Bespoke project staff and the community journalists has nonetheless inflected the working practice of the project. In speaking extensively with one of the journalists, he repeatedly stressed how he’d “lay down in the street for Bespoke, you’ve done so much for me.” While he exhibited a strong sense of ownership over and investment in the project itself (referring often to the designs as “our” designs or what should “we” do next) this sense of involvement also lessened the critical distance that the designers had hoped for from the journalists. For instance, the design team had anticipated that the journalists would heavily critique the design ideas, giving crucial feedback on which seemed like a feasible avenue to pursue. Rather, the journalism was widely uncritical of the ideas, and lacked a more piercing engagement with the designers and the ideas that they produced than had been anticipated.

This lack of critique is not only about affect and a feeling of involvement in or loyalty to the Bespoke project, but also a symptom of a wider difficulty faced by the project. Although the journalists were given training in both “hard” technical skills and wider “soft” journalistic skills like interviewing, with no previous experience of mediated analytical engagement to draw on they struggled to find ways of articulating critique. As a result, the videos often felt slightly superficial, and accepting of official discourse – both from the Bespoke project itself and from service providers in the area.

As in Turner’s work with the Kayapo (1991), the reality of community video also involved consideration of social hierarchies and relationships of power within the local area. “Communities” are complex social and heterogeneous arenas of competing interests and identities, which are not necessarily reconciled by geographic proximity (Delanty 2003), and Callon and Fishwick are no exception. The community journalists inevitably encountered local politicking and even low-levels of enmity – for instance between two youth clubs competing for scarce resources – and had to negotiate between following their story and the need to keep everyone happy. The process of creating video required an attention to preserving multi-voicedness, not only to make the designs reflective of the different needs within the community but also to try to avoid alienating possible partners.

From the perspective of the designers, the community journalism method was contrasted with previous experiences they’d had in conducting user-centred design. As one of the designers summarised, the process of community journalism doesn’t give you the same depth or “emotional or relational aspects” that you can get from tightly focused user-centred design, but “you do get the breadth” of incorporating a multitude of different voices and characters into brief but contextually rich pieces. For this designer, the key was to differentiate between the purpose of user-centred design for an individual with a specific relational experience of the world, versus community-centred design which fundamentally orients itself towards a “range of people with information needs and routines around



Figure 4: designers watching community-produced videos

physical space.” Community-centred work, in his estimation, cannot take into account the emotional needs of all residents, but can identify some informational or physical needs that can be actioned as part of the design process. This attention to wider service and informational needs has led the Bespoke designers to developing two different design ideas that will be developed together with the on-going process of journalism. The *Viewpoint*, will be a mechanism for voting on local issues and polling opinion, which will also have a visual presence through a “meter” visual design. We are currently in talks with local stakeholders to ensure that opinions expressed by residents interacting with the design will be able to be acted on so that residents don’t feel they have participated in a consultation without a clear objective. The second design to be built is the *Wayfinder*, which will be a movable signpost that will be able to be updated via text message to point directly towards local activities held by organisations. The designs we are developing are indicative of the results of using community journalism as a method which favours developing an understanding of wider social issues rather than a more profound but singular knowledge of individual preferences. In addition to accessing wider information, the designers repeatedly commented on the degree to which community journal-

ism created an “inspiring” methodology for design. During project sessions the designers sat together and watched and commented on the videos collaboratively, occasionally fixating on specific shots or passages because of their content or because of the choice of illustrating scenery. In this sense, the method is similar to the technique of using “cultural probes” which allows for the inclusion of the implicit, the relational, and the “non-rational” (Dunne & Gaver 2001).

Reflecting on the process of looking at the videos later, the designers felt that it had been both time- and cost-effective in comparison with lengthy ethnography, and had provided a more elusive source of inspiration for design ideas. As a new member of the project described after watching a series of journalist-produced videos, “speaking as someone who knew nothing about this place a week ago, I feel like from the showcase I got a feel for the character of the community... I feel like I can design for them.” As another designer later described, “This was different [from user-centred work] because it concentrated a whole different set of voices in a moment.” This “inspiration factor” cannot be definitively quantified but supports Rajmakers’ work on “design documentaries” in providing anecdotal evidence that film can be uniquely “effective at offering inspiration” (Rajmakers et al. 2006: 232).

Centrally, the use of moving-image allowed not only for a multiplicity of community-level interlocutors but also for engagement with the area as part of a mediated experience of multiple sensory registers. In particular, the designers cited the often-unintended visual or audio aspects of the films as giving them inspirational fodder for creating design ideas. One of the designers commented, “The tradition in design is to design for problems of *foreground*, with opportunities like this we’re getting *background* as well and I like that.” By background, he went on to say, it was not simply informational background but “frivolous” details about life in the area that would not have been identified in an interview – for instance the shape of a signpost or what people wore to a meeting – but that provided key inspiration. Video, according to a designer-maker on the project, provided detail “beyond the purely information based” through incorporating sound, and images, it allowed for a heightened “sense of place” (Feld & Basso 1996) through mitigating normal sensory registers through video.

As described above, this is part of the nature of moving images, in that they inherently operate on several sensory registers simultaneously, but this was enhanced by the “non-professional” quality of the films produced by the community journalists. In viewing the films the designers were disappointed with the level of critique but cited the “rough” quality of the films – in their use of lengthy takes and unedited interviews, of wind interference with sound quality or of meandering long tracking shots of the local area – as contributing to rather than detracting from their experience as design-attuned viewers. The very “amateurish” qualities that can make community media difficult to watch if you don’t know the local area (see Boyle 1997) were seen as fascinating by the designers.

Key to understanding the use of participatory video within the Bespoke project is seeing community media not only as the *product*, to be viewed by the designers, but also the performative *process* undertaken by the journalists. In creating the journalistic procedure the team had to reflect on the realities of work in the local community, and

learn about local debates and personalities. The process of creating community video was inherently reflexive for not only the journalists but for the project team, in raising challenges to understandings of what constitutes a “community.”

As the project moves forward, community journalism will be extended throughout the design cycle, as a means of gathering feedback on prototypes and later on the deployed designs themselves. Our experience on the Bespoke project suggests both unique challenges and benefits to using participatory video as an ethnographic tool within design. The use of video has been inevitably imbricated within existing power relationships and hierarchies in the area, which has influenced the outcome of the project on multiple levels. In pursuing a methodology appropriate to designing for a community rather than for an individual user, we have of necessity sacrificed some depth for breath. However, the use of participatory video created myriad intended and unintended sensory registers and incorporated a multiplicity of voices that have provided not only information but also inspiration for designers to respond to. The use of community journalism has allowed for a broad generation of ethnographic understandings that, while not replacing traditional in-depth ethnography, can provide a useful tool for the creation of multi-authored, reflexive ethnographic insight throughout the design process.

NOTES

¹For the purposes of this paper, we use the words ‘film’ and ‘filmmaking’ to denote the processes and products of constructing fiction and non-fiction stories through moving image. Whereas once film- and video-making were considered divergent technological and creative practices (Boyle 1992) the availability of affordable high-quality digital video has collapsed many of these distinctions.

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