



Volume 2, Issue 2 (Autumn, 2019)

**On the fields of tobacco:
Changing perspectives and expanding
methodologies through visual
ethnography**

Manca Filak

Recommended Citation:

Filak, M. (2019). 'On the fields of tobacco: changing perspectives and expanding methodologies through visual ethnography', *entanglements*, 2(2): 101-110



Licensing

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Qualitative Method: An imaginary entanglement of research in a gallery space

Ruth Boycott-Garnett

Abstract

The Muslim Pomak community in southeastern Bulgaria is producing tobacco for sale. Less and less people still endeavor in this hard-working process due to low and unstable purchase price of the dry tobacco leaves. Despite the primary interest in the working process, the usage of camera in the research allowed me to change my perspective, to see and *look* at this process in different way. It helped me to understand the materiality and the sensual aspect of this hard work that starts in the middle of the night and how it's routine affects my protagonists. Every research topic makes us expand upon our methodologies in various ways in order to explore what and how we need to look at a certain topic. The tobacco picking process as well as visual media can therefore be explored through (and not parallel to) each other, revealing connections, sensorial dimensions and world views isn't that, perhaps, otherwise would not be seen. Through reflexive analysis of my visual ethnography I will consider the anthropological engagement with the subjectivity of the research encounter as a way of producing knowledge or ways of knowing about other worlds.



Fieldwork context: A short introduction

The villages in southeastern Bulgaria, between the Rila Mountains on the one side and Rhodope Mountains on the other, have been long known for cultivation and production of tobacco (for more information, see Neubruger 2013). Muslim Pomaks that are still engaged in this work, face a decline in the production due to the low purchase price of dry tobacco leaves (which changes every year in regard to various private companies in the vicinity) and severe working conditions. The work itself is an all-year engagement. In spring the producers start to prepare the seeds and saplings as well as the field where they plant the tobacco. During summer the fields have to be maintained and also watered. In some villages in the lowlands, they make a special watering system connected to the river stream that passes by from the mountains (they informally arrange the time and period of the watering among the users). When the tobacco leaves grow a certain height, the harvest begins and it lasts depending on the size of the tobacco fields. They collect the tobacco around five times per season. Every day during harvest season they string the leaves manually and hang them in handmade drying houses. In the end of summer when the leaves are dry they pack them in piles and put them on the attic where they wait for specific period in order to get some moisture. In the autumn the companies publicly announce the time and space of the collection, which happens each year in a different village, as well as the purchase price of the tobacco. Due to the fact it is an all-year engagement which does not result in sufficient means to survive many people have quit tobacco production. The changes in the overall social status of these villages force many young people to move abroad in order to find work and other job opportunities. The villages changed their social demography and appearance, now a mostly older population, and livelihood with employment in different, mostly textile industries in the locality. Identification strategies that follow these changes differ. Tobacco production, once an identification element of the villages, is now becoming an element of the past, a part of social memory merged with diverse connotations and meanings. On the one side, the tacit and experiential knowledge is embedded in the production of tobacco, while on the other side, there is a growing tendency to see it merely as a necessity of the poorer population. Identification to the past economic and political system differs on the level of one family, and even more so on the level of the whole community.



Visual ethnography of the tobacco production

Visual ethnography of the tobacco production in the village of Debren (Blagoevgrad province, southeastern Bulgaria) was conducted in the spring – summer months in 2017.¹ The video material, still in the phase of editing and reviewing, depicts different spatial and material dimensions of the work process as well as the relationship to the lifestyle that is slowly disappearing. It consequently follows the intrinsic flow of the working process. The latter, with its repetitive routine embodied in the people's gestures while working, stimulates different and multi layered memories, a certain measure of nostalgia for the previous political (and economical) system and different modes of identification. In this video material, we can see, hear and sense the people's connection to the land, environment, the village and its traditions, as well as to the work process and the overall changes in their social world. Through the images, we are drawn into the various dimensions of the sensory experience of the protagonists (in the text see Figure 1-3).

In the following text, I intertwine my writing with three separately edited sequences of organized material that I chose and edited because of the revelation of nostalgia and memory that my presence with the camera evoked. These revelations happened in three different moments that were not connected to each other, therefore I separated the videos also in the text. Due to the nature of my fieldwork, i.e. shorter, few-day visits in different time periods during summer 2017, the video material does not follow all the daily activities around the family's everyday life but mostly revolves around work routines and processes. In the first phase of watching and organizing the material, I somehow understood that in the case of this particular field work experience I don't necessarily have to strive for a final film with a fixed or connected narrative. But on the other hand, the material still shows and reveals separate insights of the working routines of different members of the family. These separate insights are nevertheless relevant to form a certain anthropological understanding of people's way of life, work and their connection to the land, the past, all the changes and the future. I believe that, as (visual) anthropologists, we are often burdened with the idea that our filming has to result in a final ethnographic film. Nevertheless, sometimes we could use and deal with only partly organized and edited video material that can be useful for our research as well as for educational purposes, in a way of complementing text with visual insights.

¹ Visual ethnography was a part of an Erasmus + Traineeship program at the Center for intangible cultural heritage, Institute for folkloristics and Ethnographic museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia (Bulgaria).



From my past (and diverse) experience in the field of visual ethnography, I realized that the use of camera in empirical research sets qualitatively different relations and dynamics between the researcher and participants in comparison to the use of classical ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews.² In this light, it is important to identify what kind of anthropological knowledge and insights are obtained through visual ethnography, as the camera positions the researcher differently to the people while undertaking fieldwork. It creates an image that is independent from our bodies and offers visual particularities of a certain time and space that are concrete, seen and audible (MacDougall 2005: 3). After editing and reviewing the footage it was important for me to better understand the camera's presence and its effect, to understand what the contact between me as a researcher and the protagonists reveals in people, what kind of feelings, memories and emotions it evokes. Similarly as many other visual anthropologists already noticed (in the form of their writing and personal experiences), I didn't see video material as mere information through which I could take cultural meanings, but saw visual ethnography as a means of coming to a certain anthropological insight and understanding (see Crawford 1993; MacDougall 2005; Jenssen 2009; Grossman 2010; Pink 2011). These experiences of doing visual ethnography are of great methodological value but they often stay as part of our memories or field work notes as a kind of sediment of our understandings that we don't always reflect or include in our written work.

Sensing tobacco

During my first visits in the village, I was mostly interested in the working process and especially the informational aspects of it but with the help of the camera's presence, I started to see and *look* at this process on different and multifaceted levels. The camera helped me to understand the sensorial aspect of this hard work that starts in the middle of the night and to understand how the routine itself affects my protagonists. All of them (mostly women) were in a way raised 'in the field' as they have been working there since their childhood. The routine is therefore seen in their gestures, poses and speed of their work, regarding their age. The routine and the above-mentioned identification could not be sensed in the same way through written words (like field notes). In the same way, I would not be able to sense it myself if I would only observe the process from a safe distance. To capture the tobacco production, one has to feel its repetitive

² The word / image dichotomy has long been perpetuated and discussed in anthropology in general but also contested (see Crawford 1992; Crawford 1993; MacDougall 2005; Schneider, Wright 2006; Grimshaw, Ravetz 2005; Grimshaw, Ravetz 2009; Pink 2009; Pink 2011; Port 2018).



routine. Waking up at three o'clock in the night, driving to the fields with a wooden carriage driven by the horse or donkey, picking up the moist, sticky tobacco full of tar and dew, watching the day slowly forming with warm orange colors, hearing the villages in the distance slowly filling with the busy sounds of people going to work... The soundscape of the field in the dark gives you the feeling of being in the swamp, with watery melodies and frog croaking coming from the canals in the vicinity that are used for watering the tobacco (see Figure 1).

[See HTML version for accompanying video content](#)

Slowly the sun becomes stronger until it starts to warm your cold hands and its rays start to burn them with its strength. Around 12 am the work normally stops but it does not end there. The sun is too strong for workers to be in the fields and the tobacco still needs to be lined on the strings and hung in the special wooden drying houses. This repetitive work process gives you a specific feeling of being in tune with the natural flow of the day, seeing the sunrise in a real time, while it draws you into the sensual aspect of the meditative routine. Through rewatching the video material (seen in Figure 1-3) we get an enormous amount of ethnographic information about material culture in addition to the sensorial aspects of everyday life activities (see also Lydall, Strecker 2006: 148; Favero 2013: 70). But despite all these romantic impressions, the work demands strength and endurance, as the harvest takes around one month to be completed and most of the people in the village also work double shifts in textile (and other) factories in the close-by city of Goce Delchev.

What raised my interest while rewatching the footage more times, was also the spontaneous personal stories of the childhood memories from the tobacco fields, without my questions triggering them (see Figure 1 and 2). Without being provoked, Emine spoke many times about Fatme, her oldest daughter (my main protagonist), as a consequence of our interaction with the camera that evoked memories and sentimentality (seen in Figure 1). In this way, I saw tobacco production as an important identification element that raises different questions regarding the past and connection to it. The rewatching of the footage enabled me to see things and events from fieldwork from different angles and during different periods of research process. It also allowed for the possibility to overview my own position towards the people I participated with. Field notes are useful in this sense but I agree with Leslie Devereaux when she



states that writing takes place after the experience, while, on the other hand, each film take happens or is constructed in the moment of recording (1995: 72). I take this contingency of experience (with the camera) as a process of entering, engagement and immersion into the social reality that is constantly re-created and depends on our ever-changing interaction with the world. With the analysis of my fieldwork, I could strive to understand this intertwined relationship between ethnographic practices and forms of representation in anthropology.

Fatme (seen in Figure 2 and 3) was the main protagonist and interlocutor during my fieldwork. I followed her through the summer months while she was doing different chores concerning tobacco production. Current organized video material is therefore focused mainly on her as well as her mother (seen in Figure 1), her husband and on some occasions her sister, all of them being interconnected in the work phases. In order to depict and point to generational aspect of the work process, I decided not to focus entirely on Fatme while organizing the video material. Similar to her mother, Fatme revealed a lot of personal memories of her childhood on the field, without actually being pointed to them (see Figure 2). Through similar moments, I understood that tobacco production is more than just a work process but that it creates a certain identification with and nostalgia to the past.

[See HTML version for accompanying video content](#)

From the experience of being (literally) in the field with my protagonists, I was somehow *inhaled* into the working process of the tobacco and could sense how its materiality affects and triggers many diverse aspects. From exploitation, depopulation, exhaustion to intertwinement of various identification elements as well as feeling of nostalgia. As it is hard to work on the tobacco fields, it is also hard to film the tobacco work processes, as the tar on the leaves could potentially damage the equipment. Similarly, you cannot really move a lot while filming due to the height of the leaves in the peak of the harvesting season (the leaves are almost 2 meters high). In comparison to other fieldwork experiences, in the case of tobacco, I was taken aback by the hard work and felt it a strong burden, seeing my protagonists tired from the daily routine. After a few days, I always felt the urge to return back to Sofia, as I also felt that my presence costs them additional time and energy in the work activities that have to be done.



As I could not continue my fieldwork in the village over the next few years, my footage reveals only one part of one specific year, which in the end proved to be one of the last years that the family I was participating with actually continued with this work, due to the extremely low purchase price offered by privatized companies in the area (in the past years it has been around 2,5 – 3 euros for a kilo of dry tobacco leaves). The continuation of visual documentation of the above-mentioned processes would definitely add a time dimension into the perspective of how people identify with the past and cope with the changes and overall differences in their social world. I would also be able to compare past and present perspectives and ambiguities, regarding the overall tobacco production, as well as understand how people identify themselves with this occupation, that has for many become a past (or even childhood) memory.

A moment of encounter in front of the camera: A short conclusion

From my experience I can say that visual ethnography created a specific form of anthropological understanding about the tobacco production in this village and sensibility based on experiential knowledge; in addition, it is also a record of my position as a researcher that lead to and created different research questions during ethnographic field work. As a complementary perspective of my research it allowed me a better and more coherent understanding of the social reality of my protagonists. I personally believe we do not write and reflect enough about how we gained new knowledge through the usage of the camera. I find various MA and PhD thesis projects that write about these methodological issues at least in one of their chapters very useful in this sense.³ Self-reflexivity in visual ethnography is important in order to explain and elaborate on the work process and its contingencies. The use of the camera placed me directly at the core of the vulnerable moment of ethnographic experience (Deveraux 1995: 72; Bromhead 2014: 52), that is why I think it is important to reflect this space of interaction between the anthropologist with the camera and the people being filmed. Namely, my relationship with Fatme and Emine intensified with the camera's presence and opened a new field of intimacy and interpersonal exchange of information and meanings, which could help me better understand and be more sensitive to the ways that they experience, perceive and live their views and worlds on an everyday level. During fieldwork in Debren, a strong friendship evolved with Fatme and I: We spoke and exchanged many personal memories, feelings, ideas and views, as well as fears and expectations about different issues regarding our personal lives and the future.

3 For the comparison with different experiences regarding visual ethnography and its methodology see also different PhD and MA projects that go through similar issues (Grossman 2010; In the light of memory (2010); Veraart 2013; Man of Nature and Me (2013); Vávrová 2014; "Skin has Eyes and Ears" (2014).



Because I was helping her during work, it reminded her of times when her children (now mostly doing seasonal work abroad) helped her with the tobacco. Therefore, my fieldwork process evoked a lot of sentimentality for the period when the family was still together in the village (see Figure 3).

See HTML version for accompanying video content

Our moment of connection, the meeting of my protagonists in front and behind the camera is visible – even if as audience you cannot see or hear me, you can recognize my presence and influence on the process. I feel this is one of the important advantages of visual ethnography. In my point of view, the relationship between me and my protagonists in front of the camera is the main building block of the fieldwork process as a stimulator of their reactions, memories, nostalgia. Over time, my protagonist did not really notice the camera. In the same manner, I became integrated with it but never completely lost control over it, as I was constantly rethinking my position as a researcher and anthropologist. But being “in the field” with the camera allowed me to connect more to the work process itself and also to my protagonists. Namely, while trying to capture the routine and work flow with the camera I focused more to all the little details of the work process and saw it from a different, more close-up perspective (this could also be subscribed to the aesthetic aspect of filming, where you are often thinking in terms of photography and film shots). Capturing the rhythm of the work was an important aspect to grasp, as it adds a sensorial and temporal perspective into my fieldwork experience and it broadens my understanding of the tobacco production process and of the people who are engaged with this work.

References

Bromhead, T. D., 2014. [*A Film-Maker's Odyssey: Adventures in Film and Anthropology*](#). Intervention Press.

Crawford, P. I., 1992. Film as discourse: the invention of anthropological realities. In: P. I. Crawford and Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, eds. [*Film as Ethnography*](#). Manchester University Press.



Crawford, P. I., 1993. Text and context in ethnographic film. Or “To whom it may concern.” In: P. I. Crawford and S. B. Hafsteinsson, eds. [*The Construction of the Viewer: Media Ethnography and the Anthropology of Audiences*](#), *Proceedings from NAFA 3*. Aarhus: Left Coast Press, pp.153-149.

Devereaux, L., 1995. Experience, Re-presentation, and Film. In: L. Devereaux and R. Hillman, eds. [*Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography*](#). 1st edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 56-76.

Favero, P. S. H., 2013. Picturing Life-Worlds in the City Notes for a Slow, Aimless and Playful Visual Ethnography. *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo – AAM*, 15(2): pp 69–85.

Grimshaw, A. and A. Ravetz, 2005. Introduction: Visualizing Anthropology. In: A. Grimshaw and A. Ravetz, eds. [*Visualizing Anthropology: Experimenting with image-based ethnography*](#). Bristol, Portland: Intellect Books, pp.1-16.

Grimshaw, A. and A. Ravetz, 2009. Rethinking Observational Cinema. In: [*Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*](#). Indiana University Press.

Grossman, R. A., 2010. *Chorographies of Memory: Everyday Sites and Practices of Remembrance Work in Post-Socialist, EU Accession-Era Bucharest*. Ph. D. University of Manchester, Faculty of Humanities, School of Social Sciences.

Jenssen, T. and Crawford, P. I. eds., 2009. [*Behind the Eye: Reflexive Methods in Culture Studies, Ethnographic Film, and Visual Media*](#), *NAFA series volume 4*. 1st edition. Aarhus: Nordic Anthropological Film Association and Intervention Press.

Lydall, J. and I. Stecker, 2006. Men and Women on Both Sides of the Camera. In: M. Postma and P. I. Crawford, eds. [*Reflecting Visual Ethnography: Using the Camera in Anthropological Research*](#). 1st edition. Leiden: Routledge.

MacDougall, D., 2005. [*The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*](#). Princeton, New York: Princeton University Press.

Neuburger, M., 2013. [*Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria*](#). Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press.

Pink, S., 2008. [More visualizing, more methodologies: On video, reflexivity and qualitative research](#). *The Sociological Review* 49: 586-599.

Pink, S., 2011. [Multimodality, Multisensoriality and Ethnographic Knowing: Social Semiotics and the Phenomenology of Perception](#). *Qualitative Research*, 11 (3),



pp.261-276.

Port, van de M., 2018. [In Love with My Footage: Desirous Undercurrents in the Making of an Essay Film on Candomblé](#). *Visual Anthropology Review*, 34(2), pp.136–146.

Vávrová, D., 2014. “Skin Has Eyes and Ears”: *Audio-Visual Ethnography in a Sepik Society*. Ph. D. James Cook University. Available at: <<https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/28025/>> [accessed 20. 7. 2018].

Veraart, O., 2013. *Man of Nature and Me: Research on the Boundary between Anthropology and Art*. MA. University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway. Available at: <<https://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/5656>> [accessed 12. 8. 2018].

Films

In the light of memory, 2010. [film] Directed by Alyssa R. Grossman. Romania: Bucharest. Color, 40 mins.

“Skin Has Eyes and Ears”: *Audio-Visual Ethnography in a Sepik Society*, 2014. [film] Directed by Daniela Vávrová,. Papua New Guinea. Color, 83 mins. Available at: <<https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/28025/24/28025-vavrova-2014-dvd-skin-has-eyes-and-ears.mp4>> [accessed 20. 7. 2018].

Man of Nature and Me, 2013. [film] Directed by Orsolya Veraart. Romania: Transylvania Color, 30 mins.

[Manca Filak](#) finished her master degree at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia). She got a student Prešeren award for her Master thesis, based on a one-year ethnographic field work in Skopje, Macedonia. Since 2012 she’s active in the field of visual anthropology as an author of ethnographic films and documentaries shown at various film festivals around Europe and abroad. She is currently working as a Young Researcher at the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Ljubljana, Slovenia), where as a part of Audiovisual Laboratory she’s helping with the organization of Days of ethnographic film festival and Summer School of Visual Ethnography. ORCID: [0000-0003-0708-502X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0708-502X)
Web: www.ethnocinema-production.com/