

The Multimodal Relationships Between Audience, Artists, and Researchers in Ethnographic Media Production

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With the growing appeal of interdisciplinary ethnographic media in recent years, the relationship between community viewers, artists, and researchers has been redefined: while researchers can invite community artists to recreate a multidimensional academic work based on existing scholarly research, artists and filmmakers are capable of creating immersive experiences for community viewers. Through analyzing different approaches in two ethnographic media works, *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution* (Hamdy, Nye 2020) and *Maribor Uprisings* (Milton Razsa, 2017), I hope to demonstrate the dynamics of multimodality in reforming the collaborative relationships post-fieldwork in ethnographic media production, particularly in terms of the artist mediations and the modes of presentation that invite audience's participation.

Firstly, interdisciplinary cooperation with artists can be a profound component in achieving the multimodality of ethnographic works. One striking example is *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution*, a graphic fiction written by scholars Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye and illustrated by Rhode Island School Of Design (RISD) comic artists Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer. Set during the Egyptian Revolution, the story depicts the unlikely friendship between two teenage girls across different cultures and religions—Anna, a white American, and Layla, an Egyptian Arab. Amid personal and family medical crises, and political turmoil, the story unfolds their complex friendship, highlighting the differences in American and Egyptian healthcare and societal expectations. (Hamdy, Nye 2020) In sketching new scenes, the collaborative artists Bao and Brewer, as part of *Lissa's* team, not only visited Egypt but also anonymized and reimagined the protagonists with abstract representations in their distinct artistic voices and styles, contributing significantly to the team's multimodal research. In the essay by Rachel Hurdley, Mike Biddulph, Vincent Backhaus, Tara Hipwood, and Rumana Hossain, the authors believed that drawing from social sciences can challenge traditional narratives and ground multimodality and material methodology. (Hurdley, Biddulph, Backhaus, Hipwood, Hossain 2017, 748-753) As illustrated by this idea, the artists have already become the final co-producers, and the shrewd decisions made behind their drawing styles can be considered a form of research methodology. Despite challenges in reconciling real fieldwork with artistic drawings and ethically reconstructing work while accurately addressing issues, the shift in collaboration now allows artists, as equals to researchers, to have similar control in media production.

A further example showcasing the artists' agency in this collaborative media production is the separation of the comic panel framing between dialogues and drawings. Artists Bao and Brewer intentionally deliver a sense of space and time so that the audience can interact with the corresponding space and content simultaneously, which stresses the distance of the relationship and further visually resonates with the audience's emotions. On page 52 of *Lissa*, Anna and Uncle Jake are depicted in separate frames or at a distance during her father's

funeral. On page 53, the artists portray Anna's childhood memory with her uncle on the beach, emphasizing detachment and prompting a reevaluation of kinship over time. Indeed, this type of drawing could transcend the limitations of time and space, which is usually unattainable in traditional written narratives. Concurrently, in a cinematic way, such as by zooming in and out on Anna's face with grief and confounding facial expressions when she meets her uncle, a greater audience, including children and young adults, will be more likely to understand the inner core of kinships or friendships with complex emotions in this political landscape. Thus, in this partnership where anthropologists are writers and community artists are illustrators, graphic drawing serves as a research method, which encourages wider sharing of this content by lowering the barrier of engagement through relatively uncomplicated sketches that capture the intricate emotions of the protagonist.

Increasing participation of artists as a part of research in the production of ethnographic media revolutionizes the relationship between ethnography and viewers—technological advancement toward more interactive experiences draws viewers closer to the forefront of authentic fieldwork. *Maribor Uprising*, an experimental live participatory documentary directed by Maple Razsa and Milton Guillén, provides an interactive medium for anthropological research. Maribor, Slovenia, known for its past industrial prosperity, saw its frustration over political corruption morph into chaotic unrest and collective citizen protests. (Razsa, Guillén 2017) According to Collins, Duringtin, and Gill's argument, multimodal anthropology doesn't primarily aim or aspire to replace visual anthropology. Instead, it incorporates traditional visual anthropology methods while also expanding the field to engage with the diverse range of current media forms. (Collins, Duringtin, Gill 2017, 142-152) Aligned with the claim above, the interactive setting of the *Maribor Uprising* is established in a traditional way upon its original filming fieldwork, including aerial footage taken from a helicopter. This efficiently adds to the protest's comprehensive portrayal, allowing the audience to observe the rally participants and the event from a macroscopic and omniscient perspective.

It is the extensive recording of traditional filmmaking that has paved the way for offering an interactive multimodal software program, which asks the audience to choose which camera to follow as the central focus. With the constraint of the DVD format, as the film progresses, the audience is forced to make decisions collectively, deciding which button to choose when watching the movie together and taking part in the mass protest immersively as a community. Directors delicately set up the choices between the switching of scenarios, and the audience is able to explore different sites of the protest collectively and reckon with their decision making, since they cannot modify their previous choice. In this way, the audience collectively exerts the power to be in charge of the trajectory of *The Maribor Uprising*: the choice of only publishing it in DVD format instead of online public free downloads helps make this bonded relationship of the community audience more durable and guides them further in reflecting on their decision making in protest as a community.

Moreover, the sense of collectivity evoked by the audience's decision-making aligns with the communal protesting scene of the *Maribor Uprising*, for they could witness a full spectrum

of anxiety or calmness in protests. In the actual protest, there are various decisions made by individuals. Specifically, as evidenced by the police violence scene, some people yelled, “Don't throw at the police; throw at the municipality,” while others continued to throw trash at the policemen. Yet, as a symbol of an authority figure, the policeman is always related to the government, though most of the time, they are only recruited citizens. In fact, the audience's involvement in deciding which pathway to go, whether to leave the police violence scene, may imply their possible choice if they were actually a member of the *Maribor Uprising*. Therefore, the multimodal interactive documentary effectively prompts community viewers to consider their actions in realistic situations and how these individual choices shape a broader political landscape.

Examining *Lissa* and *Maribor Uprisings* through individual choices and collective effort, the fusion of multimodal ethnographic media with community participation clearly shows how artistic and technological collaborations go beyond conventional storytelling, altering our perception of dynamic ethnographic media. In essence, these cases highlight both the strength of interdisciplinary methods in ethnography and the evolving relationships between media creators, researchers, and their audiences.

Bibliography

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