

Film as observation and experiment.

Response to Henning Engelke

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Admirable in Henning Engelke's (2021 [this volume]) paper is the way it shows us how footage of two people on a couch, talking for ten minutes, had such a lasting impact on so many fields: on the study of interaction, of course, but also on the development of documentary film, and indirectly – but no less importantly – on the aspirations of certain experimental filmmakers. Admirable, too, is the visually sensitive analysis Engelke performs on this unassuming film. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the paper is its critique of the assumptions that underpin research filming. This critique is measured and lucid, never exaggerated. Nor does it lapse into an anti-scientific skepticism that is even more naive than the objectivity it suspects. Rather, one could argue that Engelke tries to hold the film accountable to a higher standard of objectivity: a standard that would acknowledge and proceed in full awareness of the Doris film's status as an artifact of experiment.

Of course, the team of specialists who analyzed the film would never have described it in terms such as these. Experiment is precisely what they tried to avoid. Otherwise, they would never have called their project the “Natural History of an Interview”. Natural history is a science of observation, not experiment. But it is hard to know what to call a recording of a visit to a woman's house, at a time that was inconvenient, perceived by her as an intrusion, and which in any case would require her to wait while the apparatus of recording was set up in her living room – it is hard to know what to call this if not an experiment. For an experiment is really a form of intrusion. In the words of Claude Bernard, it is “a variation or disturbance that an investigator brings into the conditions of natural phenomena” (1957 [1856]: 8). The body of films made in the 1960s at EPPI under Birdwhistell and Scheflen's guidance are much like what Bernard called “*experiments to see*, because they are intended to make a first observation emerge, unforeseen and undetermined in advance, but [...] with the object of bringing to birth an idea”

(*ibid.*: 21, italics in original). Observation and experiment are not mutually exclusive terms. Experiment always involves observation. And when experimenters see the results of experiment, their vision must be all-inclusive; they must be, that is, “photographers of phenomena” (*ibid.*: 22). Writing in 1865, Bernard was being metaphorical. But even then his words were on their way to being literal. He saw these two activities, observing and experimenting, as ideally distinct – capable of separate and successive execution by two distinct agents, one passive and one active. He had in mind cases like that of the naturalist who, though blind, successfully devised experiments. Their physical performance and the reporting of their results just happened to be done by the naturalist’s servant. The servant, “for his part, had not a single scientific idea” (*ibid.*: 23). So too with the social scientists who build themselves a studio, mic it, light it, turn the camera on, then leave to have coffee. They devise an experiment, which the camera observes.

That the camera inevitably alters the situation of its subjects if the subjects are aware of it – are aware of being filmed – is an oft-repeated, perhaps pedestrian notion. But that does not make it any less true. It is especially true of a film like that of *Doris* where, as Engelke shows, the exchange of signals between cameraman and subjects is so marked and dramatic as to structure the whole document.

Oddly, this experimental quality is admitted more openly in the work of fine artists inspired by science. Engelke quotes the filmmaker Hollis Frampton as saying that Birdwhistell “has organized his body of knowledge in such a way that it has been useful to me in my own search for further knowledge.” If we interpret the phrase *experimental film* as experimental in the strong sense – as inducing material for observation – we can learn a great deal about how Frampton used his medium. Leaving aside whether he knew who Birdwhistell was by the time he completed *Critical Mass* (1971), the film is clearly conceived as an experiment to induce observations of human interaction. Frampton chose two students from his class at SUNY Binghamton and asked them to bicker in front of his camera. He did not choose at random but was guided by hypothesis, since these students had just ended their romantic involvement – and were judged the most likely to produce the most sparks. He does not attempt to hide this experimental quality but rather exaggerates it by a number of means: the neutral background behind the figures, the high-contrast photography that simplifies their features, the hieratic poses they assume by default within the constraints of a medium two-shot. Above all there is the powerful key light whose heat on their bodies probably made their interaction even more volatile. “The editing process,” said Frampton, “became a process of decoding, or reading, the footage and the recorded sound” (quoted in MacDonald 1988: 66–67). He is in the position of the microanalyst,

trying to make sense of a mass of filmed particulars. He has taken a specimen; now he puts it beneath the microscope. The NHI team, too, often used a language derived from microscopy. But a microscopic science is not a telescopic science. It requires a lot of handling of the thing to be observed – perhaps even intrusion to make the thing into a specimen. Then the specimen must be placed on a slide of glass or plastic, then dried, fixed with fire, and covered with a stain. Only then does it pass beneath the observer’s lens.

References

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