Participatory Audio Visual Ethnography:
Belief, Use and Assessment

Zemirah Moffat
University of Kent
Abstract

This paper has three narratives: the first, Rouch Shares is a challenge, the second Zem Gives is a response and the third Open Academy is a pedagogical polemic. These are my stories of co-writing and delivering a Visual Anthropology master’s module in Participatory Audio Visual Ethnography (PAVE) at the University of Kent 2009-2011. I begin by detailing ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch’s enthusiasm for using his camera and projector to share anthropological knowledge. I then describe how such participatory AV feedback worked in my own shared ethnography (2003-2006) of Club Wotever, a queer performance club in London. Finally, I present reflections from my first year teaching AV feedback. I argue that participatory AV work, opens up the academy; questions where value is placed and offers an alternative strategy to assessing screen work.

Key Words

AVPhD
Audio Visual
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Jean Rouch
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by Zemirah Moffat

Tell me a story, Pew.
What kind of story, child?
A story with a happy ending.
There’s no such thing in all the world.
As a happy ending?
As an ending.

Jeanette Winterson (2005)
Lighthousekeeping

This paper has three narratives: the first is a challenge, the second a response and the third is a pedagogical polemic. Rouch Shares, Zem Gives and Open Academy are my stories of PAVE’s first year; a Visual Anthropology masters core module in Participatory Audio Visual (AV) Ethnography at the School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, England. Placed in chronological order these stories are unique, told by one visiting lecturer (me) and should not in any way be considered finite or comprehensive. Two years ago the MA convener, Michael Poltorak and I wrote PAVE. A fusion of idealism, theoretical and personal politics, it wedded anthropology’s core methodology (ethnography) to AV practices. Our students had predominantly social science backgrounds and wanted to use film, photography and the web to constructively impact humankind.

Why should you be interested in this story of a course from a university in South East England? Why did I travel nine thousand miles in September 2010 to tell PAVE’s beginnings to delegates of the Diegetic Life Forms II conference, hosted by Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, an Antipodean audience of creative art practitioners, screen production researchers and new media scholars? And why am I now transforming that 20-minute presentation into this AV article? It was not simply to travel or to further my career, but because I was and remain driven by belief in the critical, revelatory and emancipatory potential of participatory media and PAVE is my pedagogical polemic. This paper illustrates how participatory AV work opens up the academy, questions where value is placed and offers an alternative strategy for assessing screen work.
The first story, *Rouch Shares*, articulates French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch’s vision for *anthropologie partagée*, alternately translated as shared or participatory anthropology. Declaring it to be the only morally and scientifically just research practice, he was the first to commit to print an appeal for this ethical praxis in his 1973 article ‘The Camera and Man’ (published in the 1974 first edition of *The Principles of Visual Anthropology*). Central to Rouch’s vision was the practice of screening back footage to his subjects, a process he called audio-visual reciprocity and what I refer to as AV feedback. In the second story, *Zem Gives*, I outline the role AV feedback played in my 2009 AVPhD thesis *Queer Giving: an audio-visually guided shared ethnography of the Wotever Vision (2003-)*. Comprised of a 60-minute film and a 60,000-word paper, the film used AV feedback as its formative function and the paper set it within the academies of Queer Theory and Anthropology. The concluding story, *Open Academy*, is my reflection upon introducing AV feedback as a formative element into the assessment and structure of an MA course in Visual Anthropology.

1) *Rouch Shares*

Born in 1917 Jean Rouch was a prolific and inspirational filmmaker whose career spanned over six decades. From car advertisements to ethnographic film, documentaries to fiction, his films traversed many genres and several continents. Initially trained as an engineer, in 1941 he was employed by the French state to be an Assistant Engineer of Public Works in the Colonies and worked in Niger building roads and bridges. Although warned by Niger’s General Inspector not to ‘niggerize’ himself, Rouch found in his workers his first black friends. He said he had more in common with them than a colonial society ‘that had nothing else except arrogance and mediocrity as its common denominator’ (Rouch 1978 [2003], p. 104). As an engineer he built bridges; as an anthropologist and filmmaker he did too. In 1973 in an article entitled ‘The Camera and Man’, he wrote,

The situation is clearly this: the anthropologist has at his disposal the only tool (the participating camera) that offers him the extraordinary possibility of direct communication with the group he studies - the film he has made about them. Of course there are still some technical hang-ups here, and the projection of film in the field is still at an experimental stage. The development of the Super-8 sync-sound projector with a twelve-volt battery will doubtless be serious progress in this area. But my experiences with a 16mm projector and a small portable 300-watt battery have been conclusive enough. The projection of my film *Sigui 1969* in the village of Bongo where it was shot brought considerable reaction from the Dogon (of the Bandiagara cliffs, in Mali) and the demand for more films; a Sigui series is now in progress. And the projection of my film *Horendi* (1971) on the
initiation of possession dancers in Niger also brought demands for more films. By studying this film on a small movie scope viewer with my informants, I was able to gather more information in two weeks than I could get in three months of direct observation and interview. This type of a posteriori working is just the beginning of what is already a new type of relationship between the anthropologist and the group he studies, the first step in what some of us have labeled “shared anthropology.” Finally, then, the observer has left the ivory tower; his camera, tape recorder, and projector have driven him, by a strange road of initiation, to the heart of knowledge itself. And for the first time, the work is judged not by a thesis committee but by the very people the anthropologist went out to observe.

(Jean Rouch, 1973, p. 11-12)

For Rouch filmmaking was a way of challenging colonialism, of leveling the playing field between Europeans and Africans, the anthropologist and subject. And when in the late 1960’s he combined a 16mm portable projector with a 300W generator and worked out a way to screen-back footage to his collaborators, he knew he had hit on something special, AV feedback.

This extraordinary technique of "feedback" (which I would translate as "audiovisual reciprocity") has certainly not yet revealed all of its possibilities. But already, thanks to it, the anthropologist has ceased to be a sort of entomologist observing others as if they were insects (thus putting them down) and has become a stimulator of mutual awareness (hence dignity).

This type of totally participatory research, as idealistic as it may seem, appears to me to be the only morally and scientifically feasible anthropological attitude today.

(Jean Rouch, 1973, p. 11-12)

Rouch offered AV feedback as an alternative to an ethnographic film style that removed a filmmaker’s affective presence from the screen. These films have been defined as Observational and/or fly-on-the-wall (some typical examples are Wedding Camels (1976) by Judith and David MacDougall, Masai Women (1974) by Melissa Llewelyn-Davis and Rouch’s own Sigui Synthesis 1966/1973-1981). For Rouch the camera ought not to be a mere recording device whose operator sought to objectively capture another’s reality. Rather the camera and man should facilitate and capture conversations in action. And because, unlike a written thesis, one’s anthropological collaborators do not need a social science degree to make sense of their moving image, Rouch contended that ethically AV anthropological knowledge ought to be shared. Furthermore, he believed that the result of such rigorous sincere participation positively challenged an ethnographer’s authority. No longer was the researcher...
dominant and their subject submissive. Within Rouch’s praxis of shared anthropology, an anthropologist’s subjects are their critical equal.

Rouch was not alone in his enthusiasm for participatory AV methods. In the same book that originally hosted ‘The Camera and Man,’ David MacDougall, an Australian visual anthropologist of equally high esteem seconded him:

Beyond Observational cinema lies the possibility of participatory cinema ... By revealing his role, the filmmaker enhances the value of his material as evidence. By entering actively into the world of his subjects, he can provoke a greater flow of information about them. By giving them access to the film, he makes possible the corrections, additions, and illuminations that only their response to the material can elicit.

(MacDougall, 1974 [2003], p. 125)

Some compelling examples come through the participative works of ethnographic filmmakers Patsy and Timothy Asch. Throughout their research they screened back their footage to their collaborators, most notably in the film Jero on Jero (1980) and here in Releasing the Spirits: A Balinese Cremation in Bali (1990):

![Figure 1](image_url)  
Releasing the Spirits (1990) still time code 00:02:36

In this film the anthropologist Linda Connor (top row second from the left) is watching, sharing and debating knowledge with her collaborators. Indeed, this type of feedback film, where the researcher is part of the text, makes the researcher into a subject and their subjects into narrators. Momentarily, the roles switch. Asch, Asch and Connor argued for feedback as
‘one of the most significant contributions film could make to ethnographic research’ but regretted that ‘to date, few ethnographies have used film in this way’ (1988, re-published 1995 [2003] Hockings ed., p. 349).

In spite of these significant individuals’ collective enthusiasms for participatory anthropology and AV feedback, shared anthropology is only just making a home within the Visual, Social and Cultural Anthropological academies. What could explain such inertia? Writing in 1994, MacDougall felt compelled to re-evaluate his earlier enthusiasm for participatory anthropology:

Today I am more inclined to see this as leading to a confusion of perspectives and a restraint on each party’s declaring its true interests. I would instead prefer a principle of multiple authorship leading to a form of intertextual cinema. Through such an approach ethnographic film may be in a better position to address conflicting views of reality, in a world in which observers and observed are less clearly separated and in which reciprocal observation and exchange increasingly matter.

(MacDougall, 1995 [2003], p. 129)

David MacDougall’s reassessment must come from experience (possibly the 1980 film Takeover he made with his wife Judith MacDougall, or her own 1980 film The House Opening, both participatory in scope). Somehow, sharing knowledge in this way troubled the academy.

Rouch wrote that his first audience was always himself, the second his collaborators and the third the rest of the world, with the academy being part of the latter (1973, 11-12). No one likes to be considered last, so maybe it is this audience prioritization that troubles. Or could it be that the reason why shared anthropology did not catch on in the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s is because it takes a lot of courage and strength to humble oneself. Possibly in the midst of the Writing Culture Debates, and sustained critique from Subaltern, second and third wave Feminists, the discipline of anthropology was just not secure enough to take more criticism on board, let alone invite it in.

However, now ten years into a new millennium, encouraged by the internet’s ability to share knowledge, participatory work has gained momentum (for UK resource visit http://www.insightshare.org). In 2003 I began my own shared anthropological research. I did
encounter many challenges negotiating a doctoral path whilst juggling the wills of several collaborators, but concluded that it was possible to work as a shared anthropologist and create ethnographies that were polyphonic not cacophonous, ones useful for collaborators and the academy alike (Moffat 2009: 109). The resulting website Queergiving (2011) is my offering to Rouch’s vision dreamt over thirty years ago.

2) Zem Gives

In 2003 I began my AVPhD at the University of Westminster, London. Entitled “Queer Giving: an audio-Visually guided ethnography of the Wotever vision (2003),” the thesis was the realisation of one practice-led research project into contemporary radical queer ways of being. It was comprised of a 60min film Mirror Mirror and a 60,000 word paper One Queer Gift; the assessment weighting was 50:50. Through marrying a Sony PD170 pro-am camera with quick VHS and DVD copying, I sought to bring Rouch’s ‘instant feedback’ (1973, 13) into the 21st Century. My focus was the utopian vision of Wotever World, London’s newest queer space that welcomed people of all genders and sexualities. I argued that radical queer identities, as found in the major urban centres of the metropolitan West, derived their multiple-meanings, integrity and raison d’etre within and through dialogue (Moffat 2009: v). Hospitality was the central commonality I saw between shared anthropology and Wotever. This is why I argued AV feedback was the perfect methodology.

The intention of Wotever’s manager Ingo Andersson was and remains to facilitate a performance and social space open to people of all genders and sexualities. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, straight and questioning all are welcome. As heartily as Ingo hosted Wotever, participatory anthropology sincerely invites its subjects in. Just as people switched between dominant and submissive attitudes within the club, so the practice of AV feedback challenges conventional ethnographic power plays. Taking Rouch’s advice, I spent, ‘a long time in the field before beginning to shoot’ (1973: 6). Maybe a little bit too long as after several months my supervisor and Ingo began asking, when exactly was I going to pick up the camera? Surely I was ready!

Pushed into action, I first filmed vaguely by sensing how my cyborg presence affected the place. Then, as you can see in the following excerpt ‘We need to write a paper Zem,’ my field prompted me to focus:
As a result of Ingo’s obvious discomfort with the ill-defined nature of my presence, I sat down and ‘wrote a paper’ or, rather, an email (Moffat 2009, 161-164). Entitled ‘The Laughing Pebbles Approach,’ I sent it out Ingo and seven others whom I had asked to take part in the film. Three dropped out quite quickly and the remaining five stayed with the project until its end. In summary, I asked them not to ignore the camera and to address their audience. I promised them I too would be a character in the film, that they would be given a copy of all footage that concerned them and that I would re-seek their permission for other audiences of the final film or raw footage. I gave them a proposed plan and timescale that included a filmed collaborative screening of the rough cut. The only condition was that whatever happened they had to let me show the film to my examiners.

As an academic my motives were constantly questioned and much of my research time was spent reassuring. Distrust crept in and I constantly had to reaffirm and reiterate my promise that they held the keys to what anyone else would see. However, with AV feedback, it is not
only the academic who judges. In the following clip I asked collaborator Josephine Wilson what she thought of her penis. As a queer theorist I had wanted to know this for some time, but it wasn’t until our final interview that I finally plucked up the courage to ask. As you shall witness, this scene caused much discussion in the final collaborative feedback session.

Both of the clips shared raise the idea of friendship as critical to participatory practice. Ingo felt stifled by the camera, unsure whether to speak to me candidly as a friend or reservedly as a researcher. And yet the reason why I could ask Josephine such an impertinent question was because we were such good friends. Furthermore, the reason why Josephine was comfortable with it being seen was because our context (camera, set-up etc.) was shown.

AV feedback was incredibly formative and constructive for *Mirror Mirror*. It built trust; it provided a safety net for each collaborator and for myself and allowed each of us to take risks on camera. It forced me to openly negotiate power plays and shaped the final film as wills, other than my own and academia’s, were allowed in to play. The challenges of balancing the
differing (and oft competing) agendas were tough, but through the use of a shared anthropological praxis, which combined feedback and a high degree of reflexivity, it was achieved.

However, having produced an AV thesis based on dialogue and contested knowledge, I struggled to write the required mono-authored paper. Was it to be a companion text? What was the relationship between my film and academic prose? But more importantly, how could I write about Ingo, Jacq, Josephine, Lazlo and Maria from a place where they did not share the language nor were given any place to speak? My solution was to adopt Trinh T. Minh-ha’s strategy of speaking to one side rather than speaking about (1982). Split into three chapters, the first chapter concerned me, the second Queer Theory and the third Shared Anthropology. In my Viva Voce I defended my reasons for my collaborators’ direct absence from the written text by stubbornly referring back to my practice. It was only within dialogue, I argued, where knowledge could momentarily be glimpsed.

My AVPhD was judged both by a thesis committee and by those I went to observe. The praxis of sharing anthropology gives us several audiences, judges and committees, all given authority to assess and decide upon meaning. This leads me to this paper’s final conundrum: how does one teach and assess shared anthropology, a practice that produces texts whose integrity pivots upon the very point that their value is disputed and contextual?

3) Open Academy
In the spring of 2009 I was asked to help revise and deliver the University of Kent’s core masters module in Visual Anthropology. The programme convener Michael Poltorak (Mike) was very much taken by my work in feedback and shared anthropology. It tied in well with the programme’s re-orientation towards public anthropology, one that promoted a critical engagement with policy and the use of audio-visual and internet-based media for advocacy and activism (University of Kent publicity 2009, personal archive).

Originally called ‘SE842: Advanced Visual Anthropology’ 2009-2010 was PAVE’s first year and my first year as a visiting lecturer at Kent. Together with a team of professional AV practitioners we taught traditional and experimental means of using visual and audio-visual media to research represent and produce anthropological knowledge. For the students this
entailed learning a tripartite negotiation between the concerns of anthropology, their own creativity and the needs and requirements of their collaborators. Lectures on rapport, empathy and collaboration served to orient them to a shared anthropological praxis.

Practically speaking the course was split into two halves. In the Autumn term, 101 skills in AV production were taught. Using a mix of digital still cameras, video cameras, voice recorders and microphones, the students learnt sound recording, photography and filmmaking in workshops particularly designed for an ethnographic sensibility. The second term focused on audiences, exhibition platforms and reception.

PAVE is a pedagogical polemic; it is an experiment that opened up academia and ground Rouch’s ideological vision of a shared anthropology in ‘sites of real consequence’ (Clifford 1988, p. 10). As from the start, each student was encouraged to work collaboratively with a local placement and their choices included a local otter sanctuary, an evangelical Christian youth group and a support project for refugee children. Through synthesizing reflexivity, practice and theory, we challenged them to create multimedia products that were of use to themselves, their collaborators and academia. And did it work? Yes and no. But in order to answer this question fully, I shall now turn to how we assessed our students and how our students assessed us.

The students’ first submissions came in December and were databases using FileMaker Pro software. Each database had to include between 6-12 units of AV data, correctly identified by metadata (media type, date and place), supported by contextual notes and written with a reflexive commentary. It was crucial that in their submissions 1) the students demonstrated correct use of Filemaker Pro, 2) their AV data was sound and 3) they drew connections between their placements, anthropological theory and self. It was the third criteria that most students struggled with, but below is a screen shot from one successful example:
The students’ final submissions were multi-media portfolios whose centerpiece were ‘AV products’ in the form of a DVD/website, which were collaboratively made with their placements. These products included: a fundraising film for the otter sanctuary posted on YouTube, a soap opera made by the evangelical Christian youth group and directed by its leaders that encouraged discussion on critical topics, a promotional film for a fishing family that was under threat of closure and a website designed to facilitate communication between Kent police and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students. In addition to this they provided release forms (where appropriate), three 500-word written statements detailing their key decisions, an analysis of placement feedback and any plans for future revisions.

Josko Petkovic’s analysis of screen production assessment in Australia (presented at the second Diegetic Life Forms conference 2010) indicated that works were given higher marks if the assessor believed them to be of TV distribution or film festival quality. If the work was not seen to be as good, then its suggested exhibition site was ‘relegated’ to YouTube, a local film festival, or worse, an academic conference. Petkovic found that the UK control group boasted similar results and I concur that a similar value structure is evidenced in the academy
of visual anthropology. Like Nicolette Freeman, however, (who presented on assessing image-based scholarship in Melbourne University’s School of Film and Television at the first Diegetic Life Form’s conference) the marking throughout PAVE was designed to emphasize “process and strategy” (Freeman 2009, p. 7). We took our lead from Rouch who said that even if the films of ethnographic students were technically inferior to those of professionals, their ‘irreplaceable quality of the real contact between those who film and those who are filmed’ (Rouch 1973, 7) ought to be validated. And so we asked students the following:

- had they chosen an effective AV form for their placement
- was their assignment well ordered, coherent and organized
- did they make correct and insightful links to theory
- how strong are the connections between anthropological theory and practice, and between them and their placements
- did they present evidence of sincere collaboration and sufficiently interrogate their own position
- at the point of submission, how useful can we predict their text will be to themselves, their collaborators and academic study?

Each of our students was able to demonstrate how useful their work had been for their own development, but not all were successful in making and delivering a useful AV product for their collaborators. One of the main reasons for this was that they were not able to create a mutually beneficial project of equal investment. This takes time. One student received her feedback a year after she had given her placement the initial film, which was too late for the submission deadline. Placements had their own schedules and agendas that rarely fitted into submission deadlines.

At the last minute, another student just managed to create an AV product and get constructive feedback from her placement in time for the submission. It was for a local migrant youth project. Her submitted AV product was a culmination of video clips exploring possible playday locations (some with voiceovers including feedback by consultants), audio selections from interviews with young people and transcripts from both of these elements. These were presented to the project as YouTube clips embedded in a Google Map of the area. Although the footage was wobbly and the audio weak her collaborators’ feedback was affirmative: “it made the whole project much more concrete for us because, in the past, it was always just talking about the neighborhood, whereas now we have been able to sit down to a meeting and say, ‘This is where this looks like; this is where that looks like,’ and actually compare
different angles and different potentials for each space”. And so even though her submission was technically weak, because she had innovated an AV-product that was useful and her accompanying paper made strong connections to theory, she was awarded a first.

Over the course of the year I found that defining duration of an AV submission, stipulating its technical quality and setting word lengths for papers was ultimately unhelpful. It seemed to me that my setting these criteria was like asking, “how long is a length of string?” Rather than ask about its length, I preferred to ask about its use and suitability for purpose. And so this was our assessment of our students, but what was their assessment of us?

In week 15, I delivered a day’s workshop entitled “The Generative Power of Feedback”. Beginning with a description of how ethnographers use feedback in the field and referencing the critical feedback provoked through photo and filmic elicitation, I sought to convince them that feedback is the most productive and powerful force in ethnographic fieldwork. Together we came up with the following reasons as to why AV feedback may be important:

- It gives collaborators the chance to re-evaluate what they said in the moment
- It encourages negotiation, enables dialogue and creates common ground
- It forces each to take responsibility and ownership for their voice and opinions
- It is a powerful ritual of vulnerability
- It is empowering
- It gives an audience layered versions of collaborators
- It highlights the relevance of context and the symbiosis between form and content
- It implicates film and identity as constructed

In the afternoon we set up a feedback session (just like I had in Mirror Mirror) and we viewed a short film I had made for them about the course. In the film Mike speaks of his passion for advocacy and public anthropology and I ask them what they thought of PAVE. Here is a short extract that sets the scene:
Just as the feedback from my PhD protagonists changed the course of Mirror Mirror so the students’ feedback changed PAVE. One student asked why it had taken him until this level in education for teachers to be so open, honest and interacting with students. I replied, “It’s like shared anthropology; we don’t assume we know it all and want to learn as much as you do.” Through the feedback, we were told that the best part of the programme was lecturers’ interest in what they were doing and their great energy and motivation. However, the most difficult part was possibly too much independence coupled with not enough guidance. Some found this liberating, others intimidating. Their constructive suggestions were to build more mini-structures into the course with smaller workshops when students could use their initiative. They decided that for their ‘choice’ class they would like either an extra workshop on editing sound in film or the popular blogging platform Wordpress and they all wanted more feedback! All of their feedback we addressed in the following year’s course.

To conclude, AV feedback is PAVE’s critical building block. Whether in practice or pedagogy, AV feedback is positively transformative. It opens up oneself and ones academy, whilst enabling one to remain engaged. However, as many media-theory academics
understand, building bridges between image and word-based scholarship has been no easy feat, presenting challenges of form and multiplying audiences. And if one follows the estate agent’s adage ‘location, location, location,’ by adding another audience, the collaborators, the marketability of a course in participatory ethnography is potentially weak. Indeed, the academic jury is still out as to whether shared anthropology is desirable or sustainable, but I am optimistic. More and more works are bubbling to the surface, and the desire to share knowledge remains as strong as ever. PAVE is a gift from Jean Rouch, myself, and the School of Anthropology and Conservation at the University of Kent. I believe it is one phenomenal praxis. It allows us to learn from, record, engage with and easily give back to our rapidly changing worlds. But remember, by incorporating change and innovation, ambivalence is its vital state and nothing is guaranteed.
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