

CAPTURING NEW COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY IN DIGITAL  
FILMMAKING AS ETHNOGRAPHY

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*We see others through lenses of our own grinding.*

- Clifford Geertz

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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND

#### Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to attempt to answer the question of whether digital filmmaking in the *cinema vérité* style can be considered a legitimate form of ethnography. It needs to be stated from the start that as an answer to such a question this thesis, or any thesis, can only be a single voice in a sea of discussion. The debate surrounding film as an ethnographic technique is a long-standing one, with a variety of opposing opinions strongly held by members of the academic community. Some experts praise film for its power to communicate in rich ways that words can only hint at. Others see it as artistic fluff with no place in the world of science. For my part, I offer the following case study as an attempt to show how the process of filmmaking in the *cinema vérité* style mirrors the process of traditional forms of ethnography to such a degree that it merits consideration as a legitimate form of research.

The debate about the merits of such would-be research methods as filmmaking is something of a contemporary “hot topic.” In recent years the practice and discussion of ethnographic methods have been quite popular both in commercial and academic settings. In professional circles, this surge of interest seems related to an increased focus on innovation through the empathetic understanding of others. Ethnography is seen as the means through which new

understanding, be it of a culture or a customer, can be attained, with the hopes of turning that insight into competitive advantage (Ante 2006). In academic circles, the interest seems to be part of a larger surge in both qualitative and non-traditional methods, particularly in the social sciences (Eisner 1997).

In the commercial sector, questions of methodology and data representation fall second to the empiricism of market forces: if the study as it is presented helps produce empathic understanding (which itself leads to innovation and successful products and services) then the approach is fully justified. In the academy, however, the issue is not quite as simple.

The academy serves both the roles of furthering the collective body of research and knowledge, and of determining, at least for itself, what constitutes research and knowledge in the first place. To this second point, the surge in non-traditional methods, including various forms of ethnographic study and data representation, has raised many questions. Should non-traditional forms of data representation such as films, fictional works of writing, or theater, be considered legitimate ways of communicating knowledge and meaning within research institutions? Can they sit alongside more traditional methods based in propositional logic and quantitative measurement, and still be considered legitimate research 'documents'?

These questions are significant ones. As Elliot Eisner (1997) puts it, the question of what should count as research is one "with high stakes, for it pertains to matters of legitimacy, authority, and ultimately to who possesses the power to publish and promote" (p. 5). The question of whether a documentary

film constitutes valid data representation entails many deeper questions about what constitutes knowledge, how meaning is made, and who has the authority to legitimize epistemological conceptions.

Obviously all questions about what constitutes knowledge, or for that matter about the ultimate legitimacy of this or that form of data representation, are not going to be answered definitively here or in any other static document. In fact, the very idea that such a decision could be ‘made’ implies a hierarchical, authoritative, canonizing body within the academy that simply does not exist. The academic world is a community, or a set of communities, and “what succeeds in deepening meaning, expanding awareness, and enlarging understanding is, in the end, a community decision” (Eisner, 1997, p.6). We cannot hope to conclusively “prove” the validity of a particular research method in this or any static document. We can, however, examine the nuances of a particular case in order to better inform the opinions of those in the academic community.

To that aim, this thesis presents a case study of the would-be ethnographic experience of researching, filming, editing, and producing a documentary film in the *cinema vérité* tradition. In it, I offer a detailed examination of my own processes and product and compare those to the processes of ethnography as it is commonly understood. My hope is that the examination will serve as a sort of ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) to be added to the on-going conversation about what constitutes legitimate research.

## What is ethnography?

Before examining the details of this case, it seems prudent to set out a definition of what ethnography is and how, in the abstract, one goes about doing ethnographic research.

Ethnography literally means “the depiction of a people.” The word is derived etymologically from the greek terms *Ethnos* (meaning “a people”) and *graphie* (meaning “a writing, a drawing, a representation”). In its most basic sense, ethnography is simply a description of some group or community. It is about “study that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation” and study that lets us see the world in others’ terms (Babbie, 2004, p. 302).

The focus of ethnography is on the generation of that description, not on the methods used to obtain it. “The purpose of ethnography is to describe, organize, analyze reality as seen by a particular community” (W. Partridge, lecture, March 15, 2005). As Geertz (1973) has put it, while the work may entail “establishing a rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on” (p. 6), these things are not what define the work itself. Rather the work is defined by the kind of intellectual effort it is and the kind of understanding that is produced. The ethnographer is a bricoleur, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials are at hand. The “choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context, what is available in the context, and what the researcher can do in this setting” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 6).

Though there are no strict methodological requirements for the work, ethnography does require that data be gathered *in vivo* and *in situ*, i.e. with real people in their real setting. The point is to build a holistic understanding: to describe and analyze behavior within its community context, not outside of that context in some would-be abstracted, generalized way.

The process by which this understanding is formed has been described by Schensul (1999) as one of moving from formative to grounded theory. No ethnographer goes into the field with an empty head, devoid of opinion or belief about the people they are studying. Rather, they conduct their work with a “formative theory” under which they both organize and carry out their observations.

The ethnographer’s formative theory helps them to select what they believe is important from an otherwise infinite set of possible stimuli to observe. These observations are then organized into data sets, and initial attempts are made to give that data meaning by explaining them in the context of the formative theory.

Usually, not all the data fits. When this happens, the ethnographer can either turn a blind eye to what they don’t understand or they can use this not-fitting data to modify their formative theory into a grounded one. That is, they can replace their *a priori* theory with an analytical framework that has been derived from the data gathered in the field. Of course the goal of such a theory is to be able to better explain the data they have gathered, as well as to enable the generation of “grounded hypotheses” that should better enable them to aim their ethnographic lens in future observations.



Partridge (2005) argues that the same formative-to-grounded process can be described as a looping three-stage process of understanding:

1. Watch the events unfold.
2. Capture what you think is going on.
3. Verify your theory.

This process occurs at various levels within the ongoing ethnographic work: in the flow of dialogue during a single conversation (listening, reflection of what you're hearing, listening to see if you understood correctly), or in a multi-month study, where a document is produced and subsequently verified and revised.

Whether we use Schensul's linear model or Partridge's more iterative one, four attributes of ethnography are clear:

1. Ethnographers begin with a vague understanding that informs what they pay attention to during their initial research
2. Ethnographers allow their observations to inform their understanding, which in turn effects the focus of subsequent observation.
3. Through this cycle of observation and sense-making, the ethnographer moves ever-increasingly toward an understanding that is grounded in *in vivo* and *in situ* observation.
4. It is this grounded understanding that the ethnographer is eventually tasked with presenting to the outside world.

It is this process of moving from a vague personal understanding to a grounded and publicly communicable understanding that defines the ethnographic enterprise.

#### Filmmaking as ethnography: history of the debate

We have seen how ethnography is defined by the epistemological process that takes the researcher from a formative understanding to a grounded one, independent of whatever tools might be used to observe, organize, and communicate understanding. From this abstract perspective, the question of whether or not filmmaking might be considered a viable ethnographic tool seems a non-issue. That is, there is no reason put forth by the definition or practice of ethnography that would preclude the use of film or film-making as part of an ethnographic enterprise. However from a historical perspective the question is one that is loaded with differing opinion.

Back in the early 1970's film was seen as a medium with great potential by many in the research community. Researchers such as Asch, Marshall, and Spier (1973) praised film for its ability "to preserve, in the mind of the viewer, the structure of the events it is recording as interpreted by the participants" (p. 179). This hopeful, perhaps naive view of film as having the potential, if not the inherent capacity for objectivity, resulted in a vision of film by some as a great medium for capture and representation of reality without bias or slant. Researchers argued that film, though viewed as somewhere between art and science, and having "long lacked the full support of either, it has the capacity to achieve a

truly humanistic kind of perception embracing them both” (MacDougall, 1970, p. 16).

Such optimism did not last long, however. Particularly in the 1980s, alongside the rapid increase in distaste for modernist pretenses of objectivity, film increasingly was seen as laden with the biases of narrative, independent of whatever accuracy might appear in the images themselves (Loizos 1993). After all, the filmmaker may be working from the raw material of captured imagery and sound, but the way that material is put together involves substantial ‘voice’ on the part of the editor or director, and this objectivity or true representation of reality as is seen by the participants is little more than a pipe dream. The very idea that film was objective seemed to make things worse, and researchers took it upon themselves to raise questions about the reliability of film ‘truth’ or ‘cinematic realism’ (Banks 1988), arguing that while film is generally taken as reliable, it is wrought with the risk of interpreting, and thereby distorting reality and presenting it as real (Jarvie et al., 1983).

This self-consciousness around film could already be seen emerging towards the end of the 1970s, with earlier proponents such as MacDougall now taking more critical stances. One approach to the new backlash against film was to make a distinction between ethnographic footage and ethnographic film, the latter of which are structured works made for presentation to an audience, analogous to anthropologists’ public writings, the former akin to field notes. MacDougall (1978) argued that ethnographic footage may be taken with intentional research in mind, or may be taken with no explicit purpose except to re-

cord what might be useful for research at some later date, whereas ethnographic film is admittedly tainted with bias. This model has carried forward into the present, such that today there still exists a distinction between two uses of film: film as ethnography, where it is used for the purposes of data gathering, and film as text, i.e. the construction of a finished film for viewing (Morphy 1994).

But even with such distinction between would-be biased and unbiased forms of film, the latter has been criticized as realistically untenable. Weinberger (1992), for instance, has argued that such differentiation between film as pure data and film as interpretive text is only possible where, somehow, magically, and ignoring ethics, a camera records *ad infinitum* the comings and goings of a people without changes in focus of depth or direction, start or stop, and certainly without being noticed. In other words, the camera records everything without any conceivable form of editing or interpretation whatsoever. Obviously such recording is impossible, or at least so technically and effectually constrained as to be practically irrelevant. At the very least we must choose where we point the camera, when we turn it on, and when we turn it off.

Thus, the days of hope for film as a purely unbiased research medium are over. In fact, as Banks (1988) has put it, “most anthropologists simply do not take film seriously” (p. 2). He argues that “very few anthropologists want to stand back and consider ethnographic film as a medium, regardless of the particular content of any one film.”

The story doesn't end there, however. Cinematic realism is just but one concept that has been deconstructed during the past decade, and while film

was for a period condemned alongside its claims of objectivity, lately it is emerging with other nontraditional forms of research to find a new place in the postmodern era. In the last decade young researchers, dissatisfied with the claims of objectivity that are often associated with orthodox forms of quantitative research, are increasingly turning toward qualitative methods (Eisner 1997). Today discussions about what constitutes *bona fide* research abounds, even to include ideas so far-from-center as fictional graduate theses (Kilbourn 1999) and dramatic storytelling as dissertation (Duke & Beck 1999). And in this context, film is experiencing a new renaissance in the research era. "Parallel to an increase in visual culture, experimental filmmaking is flourishing within a postcolonial, postmodern context" (Russell, 1999, p. 3).

Today, it seems, the research community is once again opening its eyes to the potential of film as a valid research tool. No longer burdened with claims of objectivity, film can now be considered alongside other non-traditional forms of research as a medium with the capacity for rich communication. In our postmodern context, the idea that film is inherently subjective is increasingly not seen as a problem. From this perspective it is those mediums that purport objectivity that should be viewed with suspicion.

This 'opening' is a slow process, however. The idea of a filmmaking being a legitimate form of research is still one that raises eyebrows. Could an ethnographic film ever be submitted as a thesis? Could it be submitted as a dissertation? Is it 'real' research? What about in the case of ethnography? Must 'real' ethnography produce books? Can what is learned in the ethnographic process

be gathered, organized, and presented in the form of video footage, rather than in the form of words on a page? We know that no consensus on these (and many other) questions will be reached anytime soon, but that doesn't preclude us from adding to the conversation. That's where this case study comes in.

The following is an examination of a would-be ethnographic research process, centered around the making of a digital film in the *cinema vérité* style. I will begin by providing an overview of the whole process, then move to examine it piece-by-piece in order to show how it conforms to the traditional ethnographic process we described earlier.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CASE STUDY

#### An overview of the case

In March of 2005, I spent 9 days in the Washington, DC area gathering unscripted, *in situ* footage of day-to-day events in and among the communities of the *Church of the Saviour*, as well as filming one-on-one interviews with community members.

The Church of the Saviour was founded by Gordon Cosby, an Army chaplain from the *101st Airborne* division who returned from World War II with strong convictions about “authentic church”, or church with an emphasis on community, personal responsibility, and commitment to social justice (Cosby 1999). Started in the early 1940s, by 1997 the church had reached such a large size that Cosby felt the personal responsibility and community aspects of it were in jeopardy, so he split it into several smaller communities.

Today the Church of the Saviour refers not to a single entity, but rather to a loose congregation of church communities and social organizations, focused on everything from health care to homelessness, affordable housing to the arts. Within this ‘church’ is a coffee house, a large rural retreat center, an urban “people’s” seminary, scores of subsidized low-income housing buildings, an after-school center for the arts, a free medical clinic, one of the nation’s most successful drug and alcohol rehabilitation facilities, an AIDS hospice, and nearly a

dozen smaller church groups, each with its own theological leanings. While not unified by any legal entity, all of these components share physical proximity in the Adams Morgan area of inner-city Washington D.C.

The Church of the Saviour, then, is not so much a church as it is a broad collection of communities with vague to non-existent lines denoting where it stops and starts. From an ethnographic perspective, one might say that this community is a particularly difficult group to understand or 'capture'.

I first encountered the church several years before my trip to film it, having heard much about it through my own congregation in the San Francisco Bay Area. Over the years several books had been written about the community, most coming from Elizabeth O'Connor (1963), one of its earliest members. O'Connor painted a picture of a community unlike any I had ever seen, with a focus on relational intimacy, practical work toward social justice, and conceptions of inward psychological and moral transformation.

Two years prior to my filming, I had flown out to visit the Church of the Saviour along with several other people from my own congregation, joining groups from other churches like mine across the country. We were attending an annual event called "Come and See", where people who had read or heard about the church could come spend a weekend in Adams Morgan and see things first-hand. The experience was overwhelming. Even more than what I had heard or read, my first-hand experience with the church communities and in the various social organizations was like visiting a foreign country. Here was a culture utterly unlike my own, with values, behaviors, and beliefs that were refresh-



ingly new and different. Over the following years I returned several times to observe, understand, and be inspired by the people of the Church of the Saviour. The power of that first “Come and See” visit stayed with me through my subsequent visits though, and as I told more and more people about the church I found myself wanting a similar way to give them first-hand experience with the communities.

In my Ph.D. program an opportunity arose to take my exploration of the Church of the Saviour further. During a course in ethnography we students were given the task of trying our hand at the methods we had been studying. Our assignment was to conduct an ethnography and present it to the class as the course’s final deliverable. For me this seemed like the perfect opportunity to continue the work of ‘people-seeing’ that had begun far earlier. Simultaneously, however, I found myself drawn to the idea of using film as the medium for communicating what these people were like. For me the experience of ‘coming and seeing’ the church had been so much more powerful than the books and stories I had read before visiting. Obviously a film would not be the same thing as a first-person experience, but perhaps it would still be better than a long written document? Perhaps film would be a better way for me to communicate the results of the ‘people-seeing’ ethnographic exercise than written prose could be?

My professor, Dr. William Partridge, seemed to like the idea and was willing to let me give it a go, provided that the film demonstrated a rigor of research and understanding. Having struck a deal with the powers that be, I began the work of securing the permission of the church itself to spend yet more time ob-

serving and interviewing them, only this time with a camera and accompanying gear in tow.

To my surprise, securing an “ok” from Gordon Cosby turned out to be more difficult than getting the academic green light. Since I wasn’t charging them anything for my work, I had imagined he he would be thrilled by the opportunity, but my naiveté was quickly met with a reality of questions and doubts. Why should they who are burdened with the endless tasks of social justice and caring for the poor bear with a week’s worth of filming while they went about their business? Why should they stop their work to sit for interviews? And what if I didn’t “get them”? What if I spent all sorts of time with them, only to produce a film that they didn’t feel actually portrayed who they were? This had happened before, he said. Film is not objective.

My answer was the same one that had motivated the project in the first place: I had visited years prior and had been amazed by what I had seen. I had returned many times to learn more, and had read everything I could find about the who, what, when, and why of the community, but nothing had carried the power of that first in-person visit. For those who couldn’t make such a visit, I wanted to give them a sense of what it was like to be here, what it was like to be in this community. He seem to understand, and to my surprise quickly changed his mind.

A month later I began a period of exceptionally long days, scheduling interviews throughout the morning to late in the evening, and filming activities at the various non-profit businesses and volunteer organizations in between. I at-

tended services of many of the church groups within the community, breaking bread with the participants and, when appropriate, filming their rituals as well. In between meetings and activities I would film the neighborhoods and attempt to capture bits of the ambient surroundings: the sounds of sirens and people speaking a dozen different languages, the movement of commuters, and the loitering of those with nowhere to go. Everything was done in *cinema vérité* style: no script, no staging, nothing artificial, and no idea what I was going to find. True to the style, I had no plan for how I would pull all the footage together into a film, but at the time it didn't matter: my goal was to capture as much of what was there as possible, and hope that during editing the most poignant moments, thoughts and events would rise to the surface to create a sort of ethnographic portrait.

Upon returning home the work of editing began. Experts in filmmaking such as Hampe (1997) and Rosenthal (1990) warn of the potential pitfalls of not filming with a script: the work of editing the material can be frankly overwhelming. At least with a script you know where you're going, but when you film in the *cinema vérité* style you can end up with literally hundreds of hours of footage and no idea what to do with it. Merely cataloguing what you have can take months. In my case, however, there seemed no other option. I felt that to stage a filming or arrive with an *a priori* script would have been to move too far from the realm of researcher and into the realm of artist.

Indeed the editing process was an enormous undertaking. In some senses it was a secondary research project in and unto itself. The act of catalog-

ing and organizing the footage required me to delve deeper into the underlying social and belief systems of the Church of the Saviour than I had ever done before.

Over the course of that work a subset of the footage emerged as a surprisingly appropriate way to tell the larger Church's story. Within New Community Church, one of the sub-communities of the Church of the Saviour, I had seen in microcosm nearly all of the larger structures and values that exemplified the larger whole, only in a compacted and narrated way that worked excellently on film. Soon it became clear that one of the best ways to turn my overwhelming corpus of filmed data into something synthesized and deliverable would be to tell the story of that one smaller community within the larger one. Obviously such a narrowing would not be perfect, but neither would any other editing process. I decided I had my direction and set out to represent New Community Church in such a way that it would simultaneously reflect the larger community as well.

From there my work became much more detailed and nitty-gritty, like the editing and fine-tuning process that a book's author must go through once the general outline and rough draft are complete. Film is a language in and unto itself, with its own grammar, its own version of run-on and incomplete sentences, dangling participles, and improper conjugations. It is just as easy (if not easier) than in written communication to so foul up the expression of what you're trying to say that the intent is completely lost. Thus, much time was spent editing and re-editing, fine-tuning the flow of ideas and the cuts between scenes until the

film felt like a film—until the audience could forget about the film as an artifact and, absorbed into the natural flow of it as one gets lost in a book, pay attention instead to its subject.

Once completed, I found myself with numerous opportunities to share my work. In my class we all presented the findings of our ethnographic work, and the other students seemed particularly interested in mine. While others talked about and/or read small sections of their papers, I was able to show my film in its 17-minute entirety to the class. We spent much time after the screening talking about what that church was like, wondering how a church could be so different than what one normally expects. The discussion seemed much more substantive than around the other presentations, perhaps because in that short tile I was able to present a synthesized version of the study in its entirety for maximum impact.

After the course was over, I returned to Adams Morgan to share the film with the communities of the Church of the Saviour. I was, of course, nervous to take my 'representation' of these people back to them, but the response was overwhelmingly positive. It was made quite clear to me that those who watched the film felt very accurately represented by it. Time and again I heard how church members felt the film accurately portrayed their community (be it the smaller community of New Community Church or the larger Church of the Saviour family). Again they reminded me that over the course of the last 60 years more than a few attempts had been made to represent The Church of the Saviour to a wider audience, often quite unsuccessfully.

Today the film is shown regularly at “Come and See” events within the Church of the Saviour, as well as at other churches throughout the nation who are unable to make the journey to see the communities first-hand. I believe the film has been viewed by a much wider audience than a written response to my assignment would have been, and that it has been effective at communicating to viewers a sense of what life is like for this unique group of people.

As we continue through this document, I will provide more detail about the specifics involved in the above process, as well as examine this would-be ethnographic endeavor from the perspective of the on-going conversation about what constitutes knowledge and what forms of research data representation are considered valid and legitimate. For the sake of organization, the above process will be discussed in terms of 5 distinct stages:

Phase 1: Preparation

Phase 2: Filming

Phase 3: Organization

Phase 4: Storycrafting

Phase 5: Sharing

By the end of the final section I hope to have convinced the reader that at least in this particular case, filmmaking in the *cinema vérité* style can mirror a more traditional ethnographic process and meet all the basic requirements to be considered ethnography.

## Phase 1: Preparation

*In my PhD program an opportunity arose to take my exploration of the Church of the Saviour further. During a course in ethnography we students were given the task of trying our hand at the methods we had been studying by attempting to produce our own ethnography as the course's final deliverable. For me this seemed like the perfect opportunity to continue the work of 'people-seeing' that had begun far earlier. Simultaneously, however, I found myself drawn to the idea of using film as the medium of communicating just what these people were like. For me the experience of 'coming and seeing' the church had been so much more powerful than the books and stories I had read before visiting. Obviously a film would not be the same thing as a first-person experience, but perhaps it would still be better than a long written document? Perhaps film was a better way for me to communicate the results of the 'people-seeing' ethnographic exercise than written prose could be? ... My professor, Dr. William Partridge, seemed to like the idea and was willing to let me give it a go, provided the film communicated a rigor of research and understanding.*

As shown in the previous sections, it must be said that film as a medium through which to represent and communicate the data of ethnography is, at least theoretically, plausible. In addition, we saw that the the debate about whether or not film can be considered valid is a long-standing one, with a history of disagreement. Though I had no idea at the time, this is the context into which I asked Dr. Partridge about using film as a medium for my ethnographic assignment. His response (to agree provided a certain level of rigor and the capacity to communicate understanding) was in effect to accept the idea of film from within a postmodern context: film is acceptable as a medium when it serves empirically the purposes of the bricoleur ethnographer. That is, film is an acceptable medium when it rigorously communicates a particular understanding of a people. Any claims to objectivity or grounding outside of the filmmaker's context are irrelevant and beside the point.

*I first encountered the church several years before my trip to film it, having heard much about it through my own congregation in the San Francisco Bay Area. Over the years several books had been written about the community, most coming from Elizabeth O'Connor (1963), one of its earliest members. O'Connor painted a picture of a community unlike any I had ever seen, with a focus on relational intimacy, practical work toward social justice, and conceptions of inward psychological and moral transformation.*

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Earlier in this text we looked at Schensul's model of ethnography and the concept of a formative theory—the *a priori* understanding of the people to be studied based on little to no observational research. I had merged Schensul's somewhat linear understanding with Partridge's more iterative model by stating that "ethnographers begin with a vague understanding that informs what they pay attention to during their initial research." Here we can see my own formative theory at play. Initial informal observations and reading about the Church of the Saviour had called many of its unique attributes to my attention—these attrib-



utes both captured my interest and shaped the nature of the footage I would try to capture.

While one might argue that such *a priori* biases inherently shape and/or limit the nature of the material that is eventually filmed, the same could be said of any ethnographic endeavor. Whether behind the lens of a camera or not, the ethnographer cannot possibly observe everything. Rather, the formative theory shapes the initial rounds of observation and interview, suggesting where to look, what to watch for, what to ask, and how to interpret it. This is an inescapable part of ethnography, whether the researcher is gathering data with a pen and paper or on digital video.

*Having struck a deal with the powers that be, I began the work of securing the permission of the church itself to spend yet more time observing and interviewing them, only this time with a camera and accompanying gear in tow.*

*To my surprise, securing an "OK" from Gordon Cosby turned out to be more difficult than getting the academic green light. Since I wasn't charging them anything for my work, I had imagined he he would be thrilled by the opportunity, but my naive was quickly met with a reality of questions and doubts. Why should they who are burdened with the endless tasks of social justice and caring for the poor bear with a week's worth of filming while they went about their business? Why should they stop their work to sit for interviews? And what if I didn't "get them"? What if I spent all sorts of time with them, only to produce a film that they didn't feel actually portrayed who they were? This had happened before, he said. Film is not objective.*

*My answer was the same one that had motivated the project in the first place: I had visited years prior and been amazed by what I had seen. I had returned many times to learn more, and read everything I could find about the who, what, when, and why of the community, but nothing had carried the power of that first person visit. For those who couldn't make such a visit, I wanted to give them a sense of what it was like to be here, what it was like to be in this community. He seem to understand, and to my surprise quickly changed his mind.*

The conversation with Gordon Cosby carries both the promise and the pitfalls of film as an ethnographic device. On the one hand, there is an implication in Cosby's questioning, namely that a film could be a powerful means of communication—why else would he be concerned about whether the film accurately reflects who they are? Even as unconcerned as they seemed to be about what the rest of the world thought about them, they were concerned that a film might not accurately portray them and consequently that they would be misrepresented to some larger audience.

Simultaneously, we are met with the reason behind his concern, namely that merely pointing a camera in the direction of the community does not result in an accurate portrayal of who they are. As covered in the previous section, the days of considering film as an objective medium, free from bias or the interpretation of the filmmaker (or the audience, for that matter), are over. Today we must recognize that film is unavoidably interpretive, and that the capacity and trustworthiness of the researcher must necessarily be a part of the validating process for this kind of research. In fact, Cosby's question was intending to do just that. He was trying to 'vet' me before giving the project his blessing, testing my formative theory, as it were, to see if (in his opinion) I could understand, and therefore reflect or represent, that which makes this community what it is.

Obviously this need to verify the researcher and validate his or her trustworthiness, both in accuracy of factual reporting and reliability of interpretation, is nothing new in the realm of ethnography. When studying the ethnographic reports of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), for instance, one is almost compelled to

also read his diary (1967) in an effort to understand Malinowski the man, and thereby to make sense of (and perhaps come to trust) the facts and interpretations of his report. Or take Margaret Mead, whose convention-shattering observations among the Samoans (1928) may forever be fraught with controversy following the publication of harsh criticism of her person and her methods by Derek Freeman (1983, 1999). Ethnography, when it attempts to convey understanding or 'meaningful structures' (Geertz 1973) is inherently interpretive, whether that understanding is conveyed through print, film, or any other medium. There is no getting around this.

Cosby's concerns were not merely with whether or not his community would be accurately represented. Secondly he was worried that the act of filming would be disruptive, getting in the way of their work and rituals. To be sure, this concern has merit. Though the details around filming and its disruptions will be covered in the following section, for now suffice it to say that unless one is talking of hidden cameras and covert surveillance, the presence of a camera can and does alter that which the filmmaker is attempting to record. There is no point in pretending that filmmaking is non-disruptive: in every case one has to decide if the filming can be done in such a way as to minimize the disruption, and whether or not the alterations produced by the camera are likely to be significant enough to nullify the work.

In the case of the Church of the Saviour, Cosby and I agreed on some boundaries and limitations that would help keep disruptions to a minimum: first, I would respect that some people would not want to be filmed and I would com-

ply with their wishes. Second, I would recognize that many of the people with which the Church of the Saviour worked were either minors, elderly persons, or gravely ill and unfit to consent to be filmed, and hence I would in many cases not be able to film in these places. Finally, I would limit my visit and filming to around a week and my team to as few people as possible, such that whatever disruption we caused would be minimal.

It would seem that in our conversation Cosby was able to vet enough of his questions to assuage his concerns and permit the filming. Accordingly, it was then up to me to begin the work of capturing the activities and perspectives of the Church of the Saviour while doing my best to alter as little as possible that which I was attempting to record.

## Phase 2: Filming

*A month later I began a period of exceptionally long days, scheduling interviews throughout the morning to late in the evening, and filming activities at the various non-profit businesses and volunteer organizations in between. I attended services of many of the church groups within the community, breaking bread with the participants and, when appropriate, filming their rituals as well. In between meetings and activities I would film the neighborhoods and attempt to capture bits of the ambient surroundings. The sounds of sirens and people speaking a dozen different languages. The movement of commuters and the loitering of those with nowhere to go. Everything was done in cinema vérité style: no script, no staging, nothing artificial, and no idea what I was going to find. I had no idea how I would pull all the footage together into a film, but at the time it didn't matter: my goal was to capture as much of what was there as possible, and hope that during editing the most poignant moments, thoughts, and events would rise to the surface.*

To be sure, much of the work of making a film, be it ethnographic or otherwise, gets in the way of any would-be research. If, prior to my visit, I hadn't spent quite a lot of time reading about, visiting, and generally gaining an understanding for the Church of the Saviour and its particular bent on life, it probably would have been impossible for me to make a worthwhile film about it. The act of filming is simply too engrossing. There are so many details to consider, from securing permissions to film in particular locations, during particular activities, and with particular individuals, to maintaining equipment (cameras, microphones, lighting, batteries and chargers, cables), to thinking about composition, lighting, and sound quality.

Then there is the question of where one points the camera. When making a film, the goal is to capture on film (or the digital equivalent) a recording of events and interviews that can be brought together to tell a story or offer a glimpse into another world. In order for that to occur, it is incumbent upon the filmmaker to make appropriate choices about what and whom to record. Naturally, these decisions require some sort of evaluative process about what and whom is important, and in order to make this sort of interpretive decision one must have some kind of idea about what he or she is looking for.

There are many ways that this decision-making process can occur. The most common way is to spend substantial time prior to shooting crafting a script, and subsequently to film from that script. This style has been popular historically if for no other reason than that shooting and developing film stock used to be one of the most expensive components of a filmmaking enterprise. Fur-

ther, editing processes were relatively slow and laborious, with physical cutting and splicing of film being arduous and time-consuming. By shooting from a script, the filmmaker could simultaneously cut costs and post-production time, focusing in the field on specific shots and interview questions that they want to string together in order to make the film. Today this technique continues to be quite common and popular, even among anthropologists endeavoring to make ethnographic and documentary films (e.g. Gregor 1990).

The 'scripted' mode of filmmaking is not without its problems, however. Once a film script has been decided upon, it usually becomes important to try to stick as close to the script as possible while filming. Once in the field, the filmmaker sets out to capture those scenes and sound bites that he or she has deemed important for the telling of their story. Rituals and activities may be staged. Interviews may be canned or rehearsed. The goal is to match the script, not necessarily to match reality. For certain kinds of filmmaking (such as fictional story-telling) such trade-offs aren't an issue, but in the case of ethnographic film a script can get in the way.

Returning to the earlier discussion about what constitutes ethnography, the reader will recall Schensul's description of grounded theory being the product of an ethnographic process in which the researcher's understanding is shaped by the data collected in the field. Partridge defined the process similarly, saying ethnographers observe, capture what they believe is happening, and verify their understanding. We summarized these models by saying that ethnogra-

phers “allow their observations to inform their understanding, which in turn effects the focus of subsequent observation.”

Clearly filming a script takes us out of this ethnographic process. Presumably the filmmaker who is creating a film from an immutable script is no longer open to having their understanding shaped by that which they observe. This makes sense if the filmmaker considers their understanding to be significantly grounded as to be considered complete or ready for public consumption. In this case the filming process is more like illustrating a written text—the filmmaker is searching for images that can be used to convey meaning as it was previously defined.

But not all filmmaking requires the filmmaker to step outside of the ethnographic process. An alternative approach to scripted filmmaking, which gained initial popularity in the 1960’s, is increasingly viable in our digital age: *cinema vérité*. *Cinema vérité* (literally “cinema of truth”) traces its history back to Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov and his 1920’s documentary series *Kino-Pravda* (Russian for “cinema of truth”), but it wasn’t until the 1960’s that a cinematic movement by the same name began to flourish. Rather than using film as a means of telling a story about some imagined world, filmmakers who embraced *cinema vérité* set out to use techniques, aesthetics, and ethics that enabled them to paint a would-be accurate picture of life as-it-is, or at least life with minimal embellishment. Rather than starting with a script, hiring actors to play the pre-determined roles, or recreating scenes as the director imagined them, the *cinema vérité* filmmakers set out with camera in hand and a general sense of

what they wanted to find or understand, but with no real knowledge of what specifically they would capture on film or how they would string that film together to tell a story. Many times they didn't even know what story they were going to tell. In essence, they "put their research on film and showed the audience whatever they found" (Hampe, 1997, p. 22).

Of course 'whatever' is a loose term, because the filmmaker must select the best parts from the corpus of footage that they initially capture in order to condense the research into something synthesized. Even though there is no script involved this is still a highly interpretive process, particularly because a *cinema vérité* filmmaker typically captures between 50 and 100 minutes of footage for every minute that makes it into their film. Add to that the selectivity of where one chooses to point the camera and we find ourselves firmly in the land of interpretation and subjectivity. Perhaps that's why the term is *cinema vérité*, not *cinema réalité*: this is cinema that captures *real moments* ("truth") and strings them together, not cinema that displays reality in all of its nuanced actuality (Hampe 1997).

Nevertheless, the efforts of *cinema vérité* filmmakers toward 'truth' are of great value, particularly when the goal of the filmmaker is to attempt to represent some aspect of reality. The *cinema vérité* filmmaker takes the stance that the camera is first and foremost a tool for capturing small pieces of evidence, and that he or she will later take those pieces of evidence and, limited by what they have actually captured, attempt to organize them in such a way as to craft a visual portrait or narrative about some aspect of reality. From the perspective of



ethnography we might describe this process as a sort of note-taking. The researcher moves about in the field, recording with a camera those things that seem interesting, without yet knowing how this information will be gathered together to make meaning. This is filmmaking as part of the ethnographic process: a grounded theory has not yet been formed, and the researcher is free to re-focus the camera as his understanding of his subject changes.

Back in the 1960's, *cinema vérité* was an especially revolutionary idea because the costs associated with recording, processing, organizing, and editing 50-100 times more footage than the final length of the film made the actual exercise prohibitively expensive in most cases. The filmmaker had to be exceptionally dedicated to the ideal of *cinema vérité* in order to be able to justify the casual recording of life as it happened with little-to-no regard for whether or not the footage would actually be used in the final work. Today, thanks to mind-bending advances in digital technology, it is possible to record an hour of digital video with quality levels that rival film for effectively *no cost*. Tape can be reused almost infinitely, there is no film to develop, and even the batteries used in the recording process are rechargeable. Apart from time, the cost difference between recording at a ratio of 5-10:1 (as one might for a scripted film) and 50-100:1 are negligible. Too, with the advent of digital non-linear editors, the process of making sense of all of that footage is significantly easier, and can be done with a decent personal computer instead of with a room full of expensive, heavy mechanical editing equipment. Of course when filming in a *cinema vérité* style, one still has significantly greater quantities of material to make sense of.

That sense-making process is substantially more complicated than when crafting a scripted film (more on that later), but the feasibility of *cinema vérité* is greater now than it has ever been. Put frankly, today we can do with ease things that filmmakers before us only dreamed of doing.

My personal decision to film in the *cinema vérité* style seemed a natural choice because of the ethnographic nature of my assignment. Though I knew I wanted to offer viewers an experience of the Church of the Saviour that would be akin to visiting it first-hand, I had no idea of the ‘right way’ to craft such an experience, and I wasn’t about to attempt to force members of the church community to play parts in a script— it seemed disingenuous. Rather, my goal was to include the filming as part of my ethnographic research, using the camera as my field notebook. Interviews would lead to new understandings about the church and new ideas for where to conduct my recorded observations, which in turn would lead to new interviews and new understandings yet again.

For me the process of filming was all-consuming. Combining the technical requirements of operating the equipment with an ethnographer-like attunement toward what to focus on required absolutely every bit of my attention. The days were long, with filmed observations beginning in the morning and rituals and interviews extending into the night. The focus required during each day was so intense that when we finally would stop for some sleep I was often so wired that I found it hard to settle down.

Before leaving, I found equipment that would fit in a backpack and allow me to travel as lightly as possible and purchased a large box of tapes so I

wouldn't run out. I found wireless microphones that would allow me to capture high-quality audio without having to be particularly close to the subject or run wires throughout the area being filmed. Thankfully the low-light sensitivity of modern-day digital camcorders meant I didn't need to bring in a lot of extra lighting. In fact, with a single backpack worth of equipment and a single extra person helping me manage it, I could capture events in a way that only a few decades earlier would have required hundreds (if not thousands) of pounds of equipment and film and a team of half a dozen people or more.

Still, in spite of all the technological advances there is no getting around the fact that a camera affects the scene being recorded. Weinberger (1992) writes that "there is a tribe, known as the Ethnographic Filmmakers, who believe they are invisible. They enter a room where a feast is being celebrated, or the sick cured, or the dead mourned, and, though weighted down with odd machines entangled with wires, imagine they are unnoticed—or, at most, merely glanced at, quickly ignored, later forgotten" (p. 24). The reality, as anyone who has ever been videotaped knows, is that the presence of a camera changes things. People become aware of it and may monitor or alter their behavior since they know they are being filmed.



*Conducting an impromptu interview after church*

The extent to which a camera interferes and alters the subject being filmed depends on a myriad of variables. Rosenthal (1990) has argued that as

western society be-

comes increasingly socialized to the presence of television cameras and other recording devices, they are less likely to significantly alter their behavior when being recorded. Hampe (1997), perhaps examining the issue more closely, argues that indeed people still try to alter their behavior when the camera starts rolling, but that such 'acting' takes a lot of mental energy, and if you keep the camera rolling for long enough you eventually find people reverting to their more natural behavioral patterns whether they want to or not.

During my time filming the Church of the Saviour I found Hampe's perspective to be spot-on. We would take our camera to services and organizations among the various communities with the larger community, and invariably we found that attention to the camera's presence dropped off over time. At first we might be an object of interest and/or concern, but as the work or ceremony progressed the people we filmed seemed to pay less and less attention to the cam-

era. After all, they had songs to sing and speeches to give, tasks to attend to and people to care for. Life moved on, so to speak, and over time we became little more than part of the ambience.

Similarly, during interviews I found that the first part of the discussion was often stiff or forced, with the interviewee noticeably aware of the camera. I assumed that the first part of the interview would be throw-away, as my job became in part to use that period to help the person get comfortable with being filmed.

For me this was a familiar role, for in the past I had worked as a therapist in a counseling center, and often the beginnings of therapy sessions were awkward or forced. Generally I found that over the course of the session, if I did my job right (ask questions that get to the heart of the matter, invite them to tell stories, make it clear that I was listening and tracking with what they were saying) they would soon forget all about the ‘frame’ of therapy and focus instead on what they came to talk about.

Similarly in interviews I found that if I could get the interviewee to really start talking about their experiences and history with the church, soon enough they would forget all about the camera. Here is where the best ‘material’ would surface—where people would be the most like themselves and talk about the parts of the community that mattered most to them. At least in those moments of reverie it seemed that the camera was nowhere to be found.

The psychology of human behavior in the presence of a camera is not the only factor affecting the accuracy of the filming exercise, however. There is also

the concern of what the camera may focus on in the first place. In the case of the Church of the Saviour, many of the organizations I wanted to film focused their energies on those who might not be able to give consent to be recorded: minors who attended after-school activities, elderly people who had lost their rational faculties, gravely sick and dying persons who could not even be bothered with the questions, or patients in a low-income health clinic who might not speak English and who are guaranteed anonymity through HIPAA legislation. And then there were those who understood their options and didn't want to be filmed: participants in alcohol and drug-rehabilitation programs who didn't want a camera recording them in this stage of their life, homeless men with AIDS (the church runs a facility for this specific population) that didn't wish to be filmed in such a context, or drug users and criminals concerned about their image being recorded and seen by people looking for them. Even in public places such as on the street, where legally I had a right to film people without their permission, I was sometimes instructed not to do so by my hosts.

This kind of restriction can make doing the work of evidence-gathering difficult. There was one day in particular where this became a significant problem. I was filming a guided walking tour of one of the community churches in a rough neighborhood and had been instructed by Jim Dickerson, the pastor, not to film the locals. Jim was speaking into the camera about the history of the church when a man from the street came up and said he knew all about the building and its history. At first Jim tried to ignore him, and following Jim's instructions I kept him out of the shot, but soon the man's persistence paid off

and Jim began to converse with him. Eventually, sensing that the conversation was somehow indemnifying me of my earlier ban on filming strangers, I shifted the camera's lens to include both halves of the discussion.

That dialogue turned into one of the highlights of the film.



*Jim Dickerson and a passer-by in an impromptu conversation*

The man knew a tremendous amount about

the neighborhood and its history before the church arrived. He spoke about how the church building had previously been a drug and whorehouse, and eventually he gave us a guided tour of his own. The sequence became one of the center-pieces of the film, but the beginning of it is awkward and uncomfortable because the man remains outside of the shot even though he can be heard through the microphone. In hindsight, of course, I wish I had filmed him from the start, but hindsight is of little value in filmmaking. In the *cinema vérité* style the filmmaker's job is to collect visual and auditory evidence from the field and then work to combine that evidence to tell a story or paint a picture of some aspect of our world. If a piece of that story doesn't get captured during the filmmaking, or gets captured in such a way that it can't be used, the filmmaker must treat it as if that piece of evidence doesn't exist. As Hampe (1997) puts it, "it is not what *you* saw happening that counts. It's not even what you aimed the camera at that

matters. It is the actual scene as it's recorded on film or videotape that has to provide the visual evidence for the audience of what occurred while you were there" (p. 50).

Thus, the filmmaker working in the *cinema vérité* style collects what evidence he or she can while in the field, relying on an ethnographic-like process of observation and understanding to find those places, those events, those conversations that seem the most likely to provide evidence worth collecting. Once finished, a whole new work begins: editing.

### Phase 3: Organization

*Upon returning home the work of editing began. Experts in filmmaking such as Hampe (1997) and Rosenthal (1990) warn of the potential pitfalls of not filming with a script: the work of editing the material can be frankly overwhelming. At least with a script you know where you're going, but when you film in the cinema vérité style you can end up with literally hundreds of hours of footage and no idea what to do with it. Merely cataloguing what you have can take months. In my case, however, there seemed no other option. I felt that to stage a filming or arrive with an a priori script would have been to move too far from the realm of researcher and into the realm of artist.*

*Indeed the editing process was an enormous undertaking. In some senses it was a secondary research project in and unto itself. The act of cataloging and organizing the footage required me to delve deeper into the underlying social and belief systems of the Church of the Saviour than I had ever done before.*

The great potential pitfall of the *cinema vérité* style is the editing process. When one works with a scripted film, editing is fairly simple. The script acts as a sort of construction manual, making editing very simple: catalog the footage into various takes for this or that shot, noting the quality of a particular take and any other information that might be pertinent. Once all footage is cataloged, begin



constructing a linear version of the film based on the script, drawing from the best takes of each scene. Almost like a puzzle, the film is thus constructed.

With *cinema vérité*, editing is not so simple. In fact, it is substantially harder. First, the amount of footage the filmmaker is dealing with is quite likely *much* larger. Remember that during filming the goal was to capture on film whatever evidence seemed like it had even the slightest potential to be interesting. Hence the filmmaker is likely to come away with an almost unmanageable amount of footage, most of which will not be included in the final film.

Second, the filmmaker must decide upon what to include and what to throw away, but is caught in a chicken-or-egg problem by having little or no idea what the film they are trying to make actually looks like. What constitutes interesting and film-worthy and what should be left on the veritable cutting room floor? In order to answer such a question, the filmmaker must first know what story they wish to tell. And in order to know what story they want to tell, they must already have landed on ‘final’ or grounded understanding of what it is they’ve captured. But in many cases, it won’t be until the filmmaker has made sense of all of their footage—gone back through their field notes, so to speak—that any sort of grounded theory will be reached.

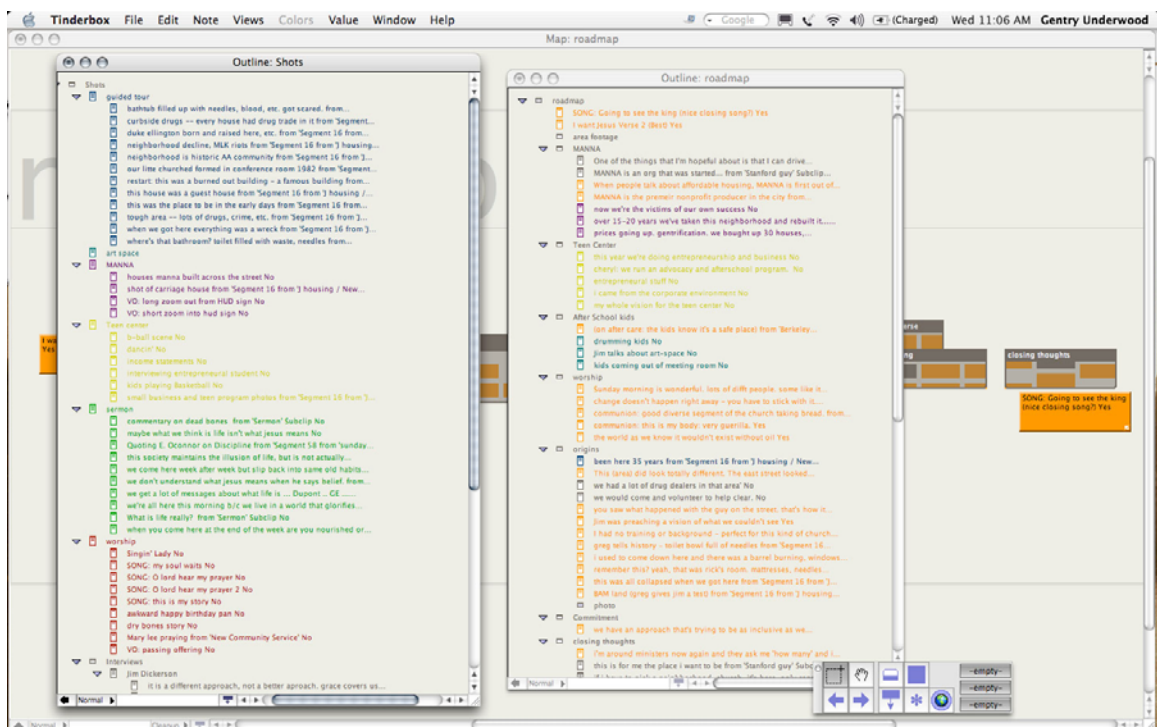
Thus, the only real option the filmmaker has is to watch everything, breaking it into manageable chunks and taking note of anything interesting in those chunks. Who was in the shot? What were they doing? Why? What does it tell me about the people I’m trying to capture on film? Is the shot of acceptable quality to be used in the film? Is it similar to other shots? What does it communicate?

With interviews the process is similar. Conversations are broken into individual quotes. Every word must be logged, as well as notes about the context and the themes being discussed. Here too, the filmmaker records not only the facts of the clip but also the subjective elements—is it poignant? Is it particularly effective at demonstrating some point, some aspect of the world they're trying to understand?

Not only is this an arduous process - it is also an enlightening one. When capturing (copying from tape to hard drive) and logging the 30+ hours of footage that I gathered during my time with the Church of the Saviour I gained a much deeper understanding of the community I had filmed. When examining footage at this level of detail one is forced to listen to the same words and watch the same actions over and over again. This is ethnographic study in minute detail. Almost unconsciously, new insights appear frequently. Patterns in language between people that I had missed while filming suddenly became clear. New themes emerged, as did deeper understandings of the themes that already seemed apparent while filming. For me the editing process had a profound effect on how I make sense of the Church of the Saviour, moving me from a largely formative understanding to a grounded one.

Keeping track of all of this information, both factual and interpretive, was no simple task. I spent some time researching software tools that might be able to help me organize and think through what I was learning and I discovered Tinderbox, a research and note-taking tool for the Macintosh operating system. Tinderbox became the binding of my field notebook. Every time I got a new in-

sight about the community or a working hypothesis about how they worked, I would jot it down as an individual note in Tinderbox. Every time I culled and logged a new clip, I would take my comments about that clip and create a Tinderbox note for that item. Every time a theme started to emerge I would create a



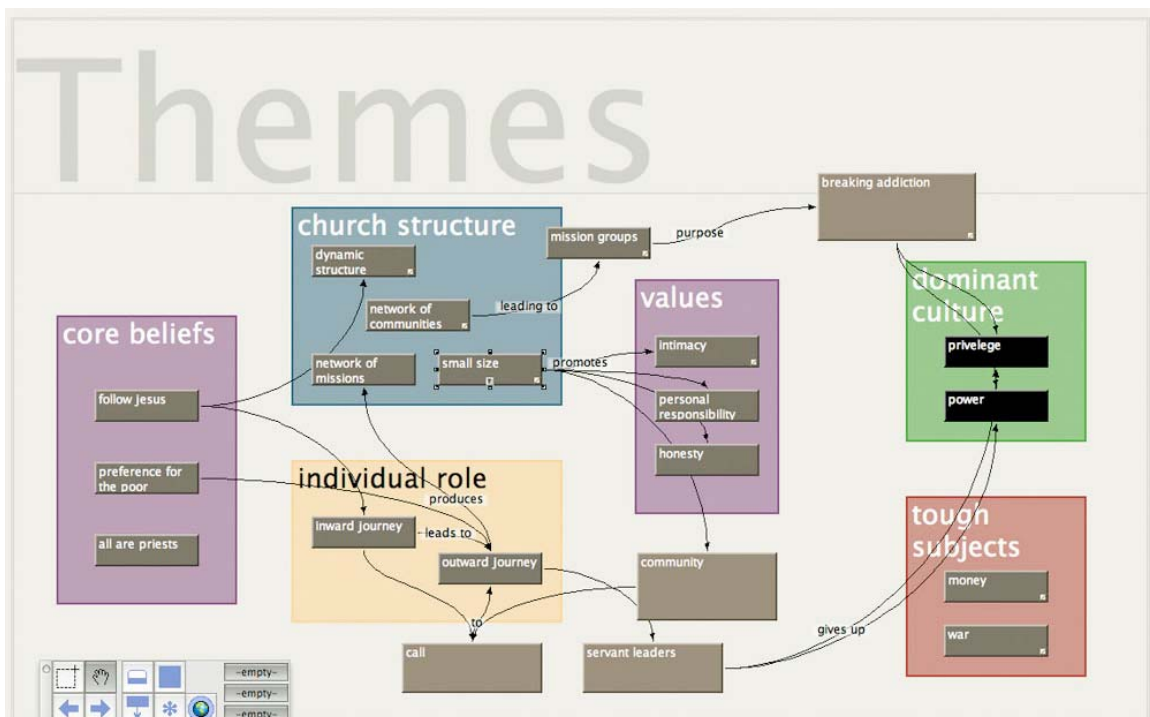
*Tinderbox, my digital field notebook through which I organized my footage and notes*

new folder and drag all related notes into that theme. If a note seemed to fit more than one theme, Tinderbox would let me create links to the original, such that one note could live in multiple folders simultaneously.

To be sure, I could have used a less technical solution to do the same kind of work. Rosenthal (1990) talks about covering an entire wall with sticky notes, each of which represent a particular thought, and then playing with the

organization of those stickies on the wall to build themes and work with ideas for storytelling. For me, however, the technological solution presented one key benefit: I could cut and paste notes from my video editing software directly into Tinderbox, and conversely I could easily find a particular clip by pasting search text from Tinderbox into the editing software's find feature. When dealing with over 30 hours of footage and literally thousands upon thousands of clips, the time savings of 'cut and paste' was substantial.

In addition, the Tinderbox application made it easy for me to visualize my notes in a variety of ways. Through the interface I could 'drill down' into individual notes in particular folders, or easily back up to see and play with the large



Looking at my digital field notebook from a high-level theme perspective

themes that seemed to be emerging. By continuing this process through the corpus of footage I had amassed, a complete picture of sorts began to emerge. I found myself with a kind of nonlinear portrait of the Church of the Savior: at a macro level it looked like a variety of themes organized in relationship to one another, and at a micro level each theme was built from a body of visual and auditory evidence, all of which was recorded on digital videotape and stored on my hard drive.

Though perhaps more technical than an average field notebook, the process and product of my video logging is quite similar to that of an ethnographer. The themes that emerged from my logging and content organization resemble the “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures” that, according to Clifford Geertz (1973), ethnography is tasked with creating. “Analysis,” he says, “is sorting out the structures of signification . . . and determining their social ground and import” (p. 7). And as we covered above, it matters not *how* the ethnographer goes about this sorting-out process, so long as the process happens and produces appropriate and relevant understanding. The reader will recall that the ethnographer is a bricoleur, deploying whatever strategies or methods seem most appropriate to enable the work of meaning-making. Here then, it seems quite clear that the work of organizing and making sense of the corpus of evidence gathered during filmmaking is a valid form of ethnographic sense-making. In fact, it is a particularly robust form, for the filmmaker organizes not only his or her notes and basic understandings (as would any ethnographer), but also a wealth of visual and auditory recorded evidence to back up those understand-

ings. As a means of producing grounded theory, this technique seems particularly well suited in its robust, evidence-centric nature.

#### Phase 4: Storycrafting

*Over the course of that work a subset of the footage emerged as a surprisingly appropriate way to tell the larger Church's story: within New Community Church, one of the sub-communities that makes up the Church of the Saviour, I has seen in microcosm nearly all of the larger structures and values that exemplified the larger whole, only in a compacted and narrated way that worked excellently on film. Soon it became clear that one of the best ways to turn my overwhelming corpus of filmed data into something synthesized and deliverable would be to tell the story of that one smaller community within the larger one. Obviously such a narrowing would not be perfect, but neither would any other editing process. I decided I had my direction and set out to represent New Community Church in such a way that it would simultaneously reflect the larger community as well.*

Once the process of organization is complete, the work of turning that nonlinear understanding into a linear film begins. Here the line between research and art begins to blur, for the researcher must find a way to translate their understanding of the group that they have been studying into a work that, in at least one sense, is necessarily fiction. As one filmmaker puts it, "I used to think that the documentary films I was making were real. But as I looked at what I was doing, I saw I was making analogs - I was making models of the situation I was filming" ( Bob Young as cited in Hampe, 1997, p. 1).

No matter how ethical the filmmaker, no matter how unobtrusive and accurate the filming, no matter how extensive the visual evidence or how well-organized the understanding, the film produced from these things can be no

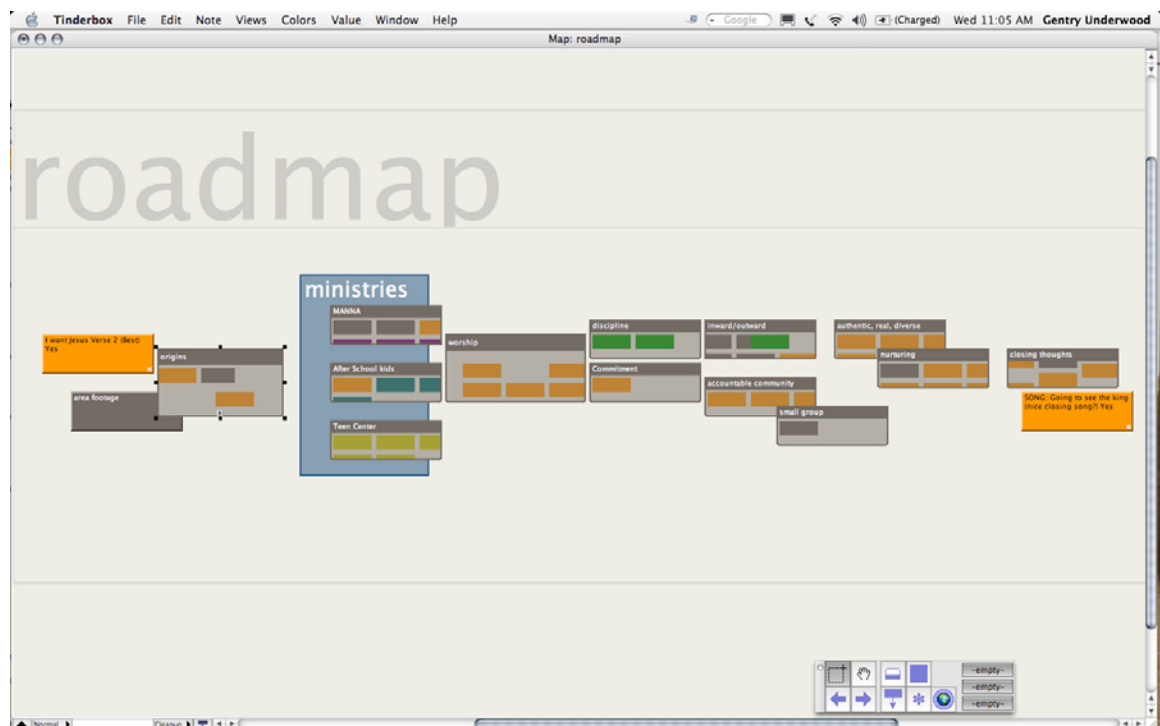
more than an analog of reality. As discussed previously in this text, even the idealized film (one that is never edited and that is filmed with a camera that no one notices) is less than 'real', for it shows us only a small window into another reality, and in that window we can see but a single span of time. Of course an edited film takes this *unreality* one significant step further, for the filmmaker slices the collected footage into small pieces, selects a subset of those pieces, and stitches them together to construct a version of reality that espouses a particular understanding. This stitching process, whether we call it artistic or not, is necessarily interpretive: here the filmmaker has the power to toy with reality, and to tell almost any story they want to tell.

From the perspective of an ethnographic or *cinema vérité*-style documentary filmmaker, the goal during this process should be to cull the footage that most clearly demonstrates the themes and structures which have been identified through the research process as central, so that those themes might be communicated efficiently and effectively. The filmmaker, after all, is making the film in order to offer the viewer a glimpse into the world of those he or she has studied. Just as with written ethnographic literature, a high-quality ethnographic film will endeavor not only to offer a glimpse into the world of others, but to help make sense of that world through the organization and presentation of the themes and structures that are central to it. This necessarily means selecting and organizing the most poignant clips into some form of linear presentation.

There are many criteria that the filmmaker has to take into consideration when selecting which clips to use: how poignantly does a particular scene or

quote express the larger theme that the researcher wishes to communicate?  
How well does it interact with other clips? Are the characters and locations in it consistent with earlier footage or would they need to first be explained to the viewer? What is the visual and auditory quality of the clip? Is it hard to understand? Does the camera shake so badly that it might be irritating to the viewer? Is it too long? Too short?

In my case, this meant going back into each 'folder' and looking for clips that best exemplified the theme i wanted to communicate. It also meant finding a way to link those clips together into a sensible whole. With the Church of the Saviour, the interaction between various clips was particularly problematic, as they were collected from a number of separate sub communities within the



*Organizing themes into a pseudo-linear flow as a map for film layout*



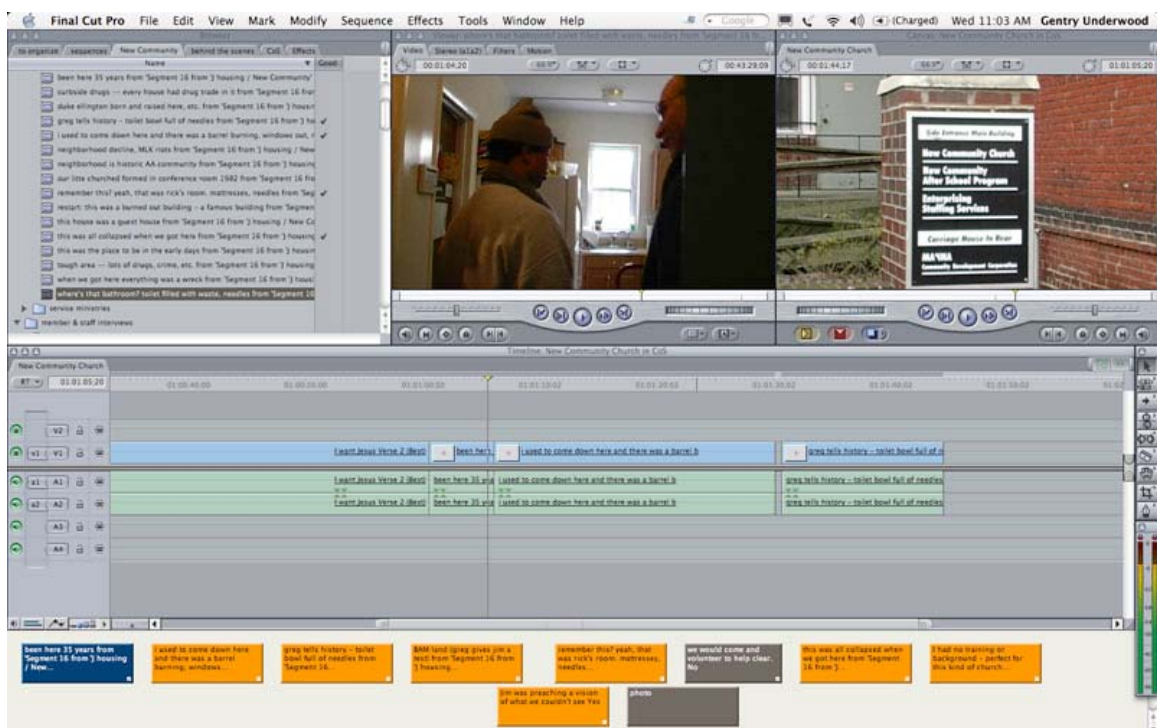
larger whole, each of which had its own setting and its own cast of characters. If I moved too quickly from one community to the next, the viewer was likely to feel quite lost—they might wonder ‘who are these new people’ and ‘how are they related to the old ones’? In fact, they might feel so lost that they would emotionally ‘check out’ of the video long before it ended.

In my case the solution to this problem came in an unexpected way. No ethnographer can tell every story of the people he or she is trying to understand. Rather, he or she identifies those key anecdotes that carry the significance of the whole and use those as the containers of insight and understanding. In my case that anecdote, that analogue, came in the form of a day in the life of one of the churches within the larger community. As I looked in each of my themes I saw that one church called “New Community” appeared again and again in each and every one of my themes. This little church did in microcosm what the larger community of churches was doing en masse. It was, in a sense, the anecdote I was looking for.

*From there my work became much more detailed and nitty-gritty, like the editing and fine-tuning process that a book’s author must go through once the general outline and rough draft are complete. Film is a language in an unto itself, with its own grammar, its own version of run-on and incomplete sentences, dangling participles, and improper conjugations. It is just as easy (if not easier) than in written communication to so fowl up the expression of what you’re trying to say that the intent is completely lost. Thus much time was spent editing and re-editing, fine-tuning the flow of ideas and the cuts between scenes until the film felt like a film—until the audience could forget about the film as an artifact and pay attention instead to its subject.*

Having identified a general direction with which to take my film, I still had the hard work of crafting the actual linear flow of images, sound, and dialogue to

form something that resembles what the audience expects when they watch a film or video. Film really is its own language, with its own rules of structure—its own “grammar” which the flow of clips must follow in order for the film to be successful at communicating to its audience. These rules are subtle, and unless one is trained in proper filmmaking techniques, they can be hard to pick up. For me personally, the crafting of a linear film from my non-linear understanding and organization was probably the most difficult portion of the filmmaking task. The



Editing the film in Final Cut Pro with Tinderbox aiding the process (orange, blue, and gray boxes)

amount of time I had to spend tweaking small bits of the film sequences in order to put together a film that flowed was *much* greater than I had expected—in fact to create what eventually became a 17-minute film took well over 100 hours of

editing (not including research, filming, or organization). Perhaps for others the time requirement would have been significantly smaller: I personally was not familiar with the 'grammar' of film except as a viewer, so crafting the piece was akin to writing an essay in a foreign language.

One story that is particularly noteworthy from this process concerns the tone of the film I built. Generally speaking, the tone in which I tend to prefer creating (be it through photography, film, or writing) is one of a clean functional minimalism. I don't like things to be 'messy' or 'dirty' or contain mistakes. Accordingly, unconsciously, while making the film about New Community and the Church of the Saviour I found myself trying to build a 'pretty' film. I would shun shots that were too aesthetically unattractive, even without knowing it. Soon, however, it became clear that my attempts to make the kind of film I wanted to make weren't aligning with the evidence I had actually accumulated. Like Partridge's description of the ethnographic sense-making process, I had to either change my understanding of what I should explain, or I was going to have to turn a blind eye to quite a bit of evidence. These are communities in impoverished areas of Washington D.C., and the neighborhoods in which they operate are *not* pretty. They're dirty, and rough, and raw. There is an attitude within the church that is quite tolerant of mistakes and the rawness of life, and quite suspecting of anything that seems whitewashed or artificially bright and shiny.

At some point, in my own frustration at my inability to build something clean and mistake-free, I began to realize the disconnect between the tone of the people I was trying to represent and the tone with which I was trying to rep-

resent them. Upon realizing this I changed tactics fairly drastically and began re-editing the film in a way that was much more tolerant of rough camera shots, ugly scenery, and less-than-perfect audio. The results were quite powerful. It felt as if I was making the film in a way much more similar to how *they* might make a film, throwing caution and propriety to the wind in exchange for the freedom to accept things as they come, ugliness and all. In my final version the film actually opens with Jim Dickerson, the pastor of New Community, starting to introduce his church when large drops of rain begin to fall from the sky. Together we run for cover, the camera recording our movements with great shakiness as we do so. “Well,” he says, “we’ll just have to wait a minute and try again.” In this silly little moment we set the tone for the film (it will be rough and full of mistakes, but it will persist nonetheless), and we see an analogue for the community itself.

Even in the storycrafting phase we see clear parallels to more traditional forms of ethnography. Every ethnographer, once they reach a grounded theory about the reality of the people they are studying, must then turn to communicate that reality through some sort of medium. That medium is usually written text, either in the form of a book or some shorter document. Much as I had to work as filmmaker even though I don’t consider myself one, here the ethnographer must work as a writer, even if they don’t consider themselves to be one. They must endeavor to organize linearly and communicate clearly a complex understanding that almost certainly does not exist in linear form in their mind. Again we see the ethnographer as bricoleur, doing what it takes to facilitate the communication of understanding. The justification for taking on this role lies solely in

the outcome: if the resulting document is successful at communicating understanding of another peoples' reality, then the document succeeds as an ethnographic device.

### Phase 5: Sharing

*Once completed, I found myself with numerous opportunities to share my work. In my class we all presented the findings of our ethnographic work, and the other students seemed particularly interested in mine. While others talked about and/or read small sections of their papers, I was able to show my film in its entirety to the class. We spent much time after the screening talking about what that church was like, wondering how a church could be so different than what one normally expects, admiring the work they did and the progress they had made. The discussion seemed much more substantive than around the other presentations, perhaps because of the density of the medium in which research had been communicated.*

Hampe (2002) argues that there are four ways a film might be received by its audience, each of which tells you something about the effectiveness of your storytelling:

1. The viewer says (and means) they don't understand what your film is trying to communicate.
2. The viewer talks about technical issues such as sound or image quality, which suggests that either aspects of the film are particularly distracting or that the film doesn't hold the audience's interest.
3. The viewer talks about how nice the film was and says things like "good job", meaning they weren't put off by the film but they weren't moved by it either.

4. The viewer doesn't talk about the film, but instead talks about the subject within the film.

For the filmmaker who is intent on using the film to communicate an understanding of a people or culture, the only acceptable reaction is the fourth one. The goal is not to have the audience admire the film, nor for it to be a particularly 'nice' experience. In fact, if the focus of the audience is on the film as an artifact, then it is just as failed as a book that might contain good data but is exceedingly boring or difficult to read.

In my own case, early screenings of the film resulted in responses in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> categories. Thankfully no one was so put off by the film as to say that they didn't understand it, but they did say things about how good a job I had done or talked about various difficulties they found with the film itself. Often we could then move in conversation to specific feedback, and many early viewers helped me identify parts of the film that weren't making sense or felt awkward (the feeling of 'awkward' in a film is exceedingly easy for an inexperienced filmmaker to create, like English composition of a foreigner who is new to the language). Through rounds of screenings and feedback I was able to further edit and re-edit the film until it seemed to stand as a motion picture document.

The next step was to submit the film as my response to my ethnography course's final assignment. Here I was elated to find that students moved right past the document and into the content. When we watched the film together in the last meeting of the term, the class immediately followed the screening with an impromptu discussion about the community it portrayed. They seemed to

want to hear more about the church and its culture. Many compared it to their own churches or to churches they had seen. People speculated as to the value system and histories of people who lived in such a way. All of which was similar to my own reaction when I had first visited the church during its “Come and See” weekend. In other words, the film had been successful in painting a picture of the community that was poignant and informative, resulting in the same kinds of curiosity that I had experienced after my first visit.

I should note that had I written a several-hundred-page book about the Church of the Saviour communities, and had the students been somehow compelled to read it before that last class, many of their questions would have been answered. To be sure, one cannot substitute film for print and expect an even exchange. Film has the power to present much that can only be hinted at with words, but we cannot expect film to communicate all the abstract theory and interpretation that we might expect with books. It is of course possible to augment the images on the screen with text or narration, but the sheer length limitations of most films mean that the information density within a book will never be achieved on screen. Film and writing are two different mediums, each with their own strength and their own limitations.

*After the course was over, I returned to Adams Morgan to share with the communities of the Church of the Saviour the film I had produced. I was, of course, nervous to take my ‘representation’ of these people back to them, but the response was overwhelmingly positive. It was made quite clear to me that those who watched the film felt very well-represented by it. Time and again I heard how accurately church members felt it portrayed their community (be it the smaller community or the larger whole), often mixed with significant amounts of surprise. Again I was reminded that over the course of the last 60 years more than a few attempts*

*had been made to represent The Church of the Saviour to a wider audience, often quite unsuccessfully.*

*Today the film is shown regularly at “Come and See” events within the Church of the Saviour, as well as at other churches throughout the nation who don’t make the journey to see the communities first-hand. I believe the film has been viewed by a much wider audience than a written response to that particular assignment would have been, and that it has been effective at communicating to viewers a sense of what it is like to be a part of this unique community of churches.*

Ultimately the criteria for a valid ethnography is empirical: if an effort is capable of effectively building an understanding of another’s reality and organizing, analyzing, and communicating that reality on the terms of those who inhabit it, then that effort is ethnography, no matter what specific methods used or what format the data representation takes. Certainly one method of evaluating whether or not a particular ethnographic effort has been successful is to take the products of the ethnographic process and submit them for evaluation to those whose world the ethnographer is attempting to understand. Of course one does not always have such an opportunity: if the product of ethnography is a book that the community being described can’t read, there is little to be done. But in ideal cases this final check-in with the subject of study completes Partridge’s three-phase process of ethnographic work at a macro level:

1. Watch the events unfold
2. Capture what you think is going on
3. Verify your theory

In my case this process happened in a very literal way. Through the lens of my camera I watched the events unfold, capturing a literal recording of what I saw. Then I produced a film that strung together bits of recording to present a



linear telling of my understanding. The final phase in the process was to show that film to those who I had recorded and see if in fact they felt captured by it.

Certainly taking a film that is less than 100% complementary of the community being discussed might be met with dissatisfaction, even if it is in fact accurate, for people do not always like to see or admit to their faults. In the case of the Church of the Saviour, however, they seem unusually willing to do so. There were parts of the film that, while raw and honest, were certainly not complementary, and in keeping with my larger goal of creating an honest analogue of the church communities I had left those parts in. Thankfully, the viewing of those sections alongside everything else was met with the grace and appetite for “real” that the church is known for. Overwhelmingly the community, both within New Community Church and within the larger Church of the Saviour family of churches, met the screening of the film with praise, claiming (often with surprise) that they had been accurately ‘captured’ through the film. Today several hundred copies of the film has been distributed by the Church of the Saviour to visitors, and copies are purchased online by churches across the nation. The film is screened as a part of the “Come and See” weekend that I originally attended, and many people buy copies afterward to take back to their own churches in order to share what they have experienced. In short, the church seems to have embraced the film as a worthy vessel for communicating who they are. In that sense, at least, the film is a valid ethnographic product.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSION

The process of making a film about the Church of the Saviour turned out to be significantly more work than I imagined. There were many times during the long weeks of filming, organizing, and editing that I found myself wondering why I had signed up for so much work for a simple class assignment. To be sure, the work of making a film can be arduous, the work of making a film in the *cinema vérité* style even more so.

The question of what constitutes valid research is a broad question that extends well beyond the scope of this document. Here we have merely attempted to look at the process of making one film through the lens of ethnographic theory in order to examine the validity of that particular process as research. Through examination we observed the following:

1. Like ethnography, in *cinema vérité* style film the goal is to capture and communicate understanding of another world.
2. Like ethnography, filmmaking is not objective, but is subject to both the benefits and limitations of interpretive research.
3. Since filmmaking is interpretive, the reliability of the interpreter must be called into question when assessing the validity of the film. This corresponds to ethnography, where the reliability of the ethnographer is commonly questioned.

4. The role of a filmmaker working in the *cinema vérité* style is to gather visual and auditory evidence from the field through the use of cameras and microphones. This is similar to the evidence-gathering process of traditional ethnography, except that it is more difficult. Some evidence the filmmaker is not allowed to capture, some evidence is missed or poorly recorded, and when constructing the final film the filmmaker can only use what they do gather.
5. While it is a foundational tenant of ethnography that the presence of an ethnographer is inherently disruptive, the filming process is potentially even more disruptive.
6. The organization process when working in the *cinema vérité* style can be quite similar to an ethnographer's sense-making organization process, with the emergence of themes and structures that can be organized for later explanation.
7. The organization process when working in a *cinema vérité* style can also be *better* than in other forms of ethnography because in each theme one combines notes or ideas with recorded evidence to back the notes up.
8. With the editing process the filmmaker moves well out of the arena of objectivity. They are not setting out to 'show reality', but to create an analogue of reality. This is similar to the idea that ethnographers don't work with data, but with anecdotes that aid in the explication of grounded theory.

9. The process of creating this analogue can be laborious, as the film must be crafted following a unique set of rules, or ‘grammar’. This, while not research *per se*, is akin to the writing tasks that ethnographers must go through when they put their nonlinear understanding into linear form through writing.
10. Like ethnography, *cinema vérité*-style film is only as effective as it is capable of communicating an understanding of reality to the viewer. This understanding cannot be the same as a written ethnographic text—both have their strengths and weaknesses.

In my particular case the process of making a film about the Church of the Saviour does seem to flow with the basic process of ethnography: I began with a formative theory about the community I was studying, used that theory to determine where to focus my (filmed) observations, and gathered those observations in a sense-making process that transformed my formative understanding into a grounded one. Finally, I organized my evidence and built a narrative that communicated that understanding to an outside audience.

Since the decision about what constitutes valid research is a collective decision made countless times in countless ways throughout academia, I cannot hope to somehow solve the issue of whether or not *cinema vérité*-style film should be considered a valid form of research in all instances, but in this particular case the evidence is overwhelmingly in support of the idea. The process of creating a film about the Church of the Saviour, combined with my prior research in and of the community, produced a film that seems by all measures to be quite

successful at communicating an understanding of another's reality on the terms of those who inhabit it. For ethnography there can be no better litmus test than that.

*The film upon which this case study is based, New Community Church, can be viewed online at <http://films.gentry.io>*

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