

Experimental paths in visual anthropology: interview with professor Anna Grimshaw

Percursos experimentais em antropologia visual: entrevista com a professora Anna Grimshaw

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Abstract

This interview with Professor Anna Grimshaw was carried out during my time as a visiting scholar at the Anthropology department at Emory University (Georgia, United States) during the fall semester (2021-2022), through public funding from CAPES in the Institutional Program of Internationalization (CAPES/PRINT). We dialogued about her biographical trajectory, her experience outside academia, the relationship between theory, description, experimentation and visibility in anthropology among other subjects. I highlight that it is important to understand Anna Grimshaw's role as an intellectual engaged in training new researchers to be open to visual production and ways of experimenting and creating in their research.

Key-words: Visual Anthropology; Ethnographic Film; Ethnography; Images; Anna Grimshaw

Resumo

A entrevista com a professora Anna Grimshaw foi realizada durante um período de doutorado sanduíche no departamento de Antropologia da Emory University (Georgia, Estados Unidos) ao longo do semestre de outono (2021-2022), mediante o financiamento público da CAPES no Programa Institucional de Internacionalização (CAPES/PRINT). Dialogamos sobre sua trajetória biográfica, sua experiência fora da academia, a relação entre a teoria, descrição, experimentação e visibilidade na antropologia, entre outros temas. Destaco o papel de Anna Grimshaw como intelectual engajada na formação de novas pesquisadoras que estejam abertas a produção visual e as maneiras de experimentação e criação na pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Antropologia Visual; Filme Etnográfico; Etnografia; Imagem; Anna Grimshaw.

Introduction

This interview with Professor Anna Grimshaw was carried out during my time as a visiting scholar at the Anthropology department at Emory University (Georgia, United States) during the fall semester (2021-2022), through public funding from *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (CAPES) in the Institutional Program of Internationalization (CAPES/PRINT).¹

Professor Grimshaw holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Cambridge and is a prominent reference for the study of Visual Anthropology, ethnographic film and experimental anthropology. Some of her relevant books are *Servants of the Buddha* (1992), referring to her ethnographic research with Buddhist nuns in Ladakh, and *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology* (2001), which bring into discussion the relation between vision and knowledge in contemporary anthropology. In partnership with artist and anthropologist Amanda Ravetz, she has published and edited books such as *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film and the Exploration of Social Life* (2009) and *Visualizing Anthropology: Experiments in Image-based Practice* (2005). Among her film productions are the film series *Mr Coperthwaite: a life in the Maine Woods* (2013), *At Low Tide* (2016), and *George's Place* (2022). Some of these productions are mentioned and detailed through this interview.

I found with Professor Grimshaw an opportunity to dialogue about the making of a visual anthropology and, beyond, the opening of anthropological thought to experimental ways that could include art, literature and film. We discussed her trajectory, her experience outside academia – through contact with television and literature – the relationship between theory, description, experimentation and visibility in Anthropology, among other topics. I highlight Anna Grimshaw's role as an intellectual engaged in training new researchers to be open to visual production and ways of experimenting in research. Her works focus on sharing the knowledge produced in the academy in pedagogical terms and the possibility of questioning theoretical inflexible rigor, defending anthropology's contribution by focusing on real people, their feelings and ways of seeing and being in the world.

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Could you talk about your personal background and how you became interested in Anthropology?

I was always curious. I grew up in the north of England in a sort of working-class industrial area, though my parents were doctors, so I wasn't exactly like the other people in my school. But I was always interested in how people live; the differences and the kinds of creative ways people make their lives. I thought, well, maybe Anthropology is a place where I can pursue those kinds of curiosities, you know, living people, who were kind of active in the world. I could've done History or Literature, but I really was interested in living people and the ways they think about the world, the trajectories of my contemporaries who were at school with me, who came from a very different background. I found that Anthropology was a perfect place for that, and the parts of anthropology that always interested me were the areas that were not theory, the descriptions of places and cultural costumes and how people organize marriage, what they argue about -- the sense of the texture of life, so that was always where my interests laid. When I was a student, I think it's still to some extent the case now, people think of those kinds of "details" as just a stepping stone to abstraction, to comparative generalization. So, I've always thought that my interests were closest to that of a novelist who is not interested in making big grand statements about anything in general. But really dealing with the details.

How is your relation with literature, do you like reading it? Because the visual and art itself has some connection with literature, right? This type of description, paying attention to the details and telling stories has some connections with anthropology.

Yes, I always felt in many ways I can get along better with writers and artists. People that are interested in the same things but coming to them from a different avenue, through a different set of techniques and, yes, like me they are not interested in doing big theoretical statements. I think of literature, art and film as really a creative source for how I think about my work. The more I read, the more I watch films, the more I think about the ways artists are working... It gives me ideas about how I might think about my own work more creatively.

Did you bring these different references to your anthropological practice and to your productions? Trying to dialogue with different fields of knowledge?

Well, in previous years I had a lot of dialogue with artists. When I was working in England, my collaborator Amanda Ravetz was trained as an artist, she was both artist and anthropologist so when we were collaborating, we were in a lot of dialogue with artists who were interested in ethnography as you know there this famous essay “The Artist Ethnographer” by Hal Foster (1995) so there is a lot of sort of excitement to where the points of connection may be and of course Tim Ingold who is continuing to make those connections. More recently, as I have made my extended film works in Maine, around particular characters I've increasingly been thinking of novels and what it is to have a film series of seven parts which is a life of this lobster fisherman. I think of it as a novel. It's about him, his relationships, what happens and so my model for that series was literature, not really anthropology.

Could you talk about your career, since undergraduate to your PhD and how did you start started connecting yourself to Visual Anthropology and this type of anthropology less focused on theory and more in other types of description?

I did my undergraduate and graduate degrees in Cambridge University. It was the days of the great old anthropologists like Edmund Leach, Meyer Fortes, Reo Fortune, Audrey Richards... they were all active and present in the anthropology department when I was there. I feel like I am a kind of historic relic! (laughter). It was exciting for someone like myself to see how they argued with each other about approaches. I did my doctoral work in India, in the Himalayas with Buddhist nuns. I was interested in the place of women in monastic Buddhism, which is largely studied through the experiences of monks. When I came back to write my dissertation - this is *pre-Writing Culture* (1986), this is in the early 1980's - there was no acknowledgement of experimentation, there was no discussion of ways of writing and I was very uninterested in the form of the social sciences monograph, it didn't interest me.

To produce a big writing thesis...

Right. It seemed that the most exciting and important things in my fieldwork were somehow left out. There was no space for reflexivity or auto-ethnography. There was no way, really. I had no models for thinking about how I could write in a way that seemed to be true to the experience. The time I was writing my dissertation I was offered a job by Granada Television. It was well known among anthropologists because it had a long-standing series *Disappearing World* which involved anthropologists and

filmmakers working together. I didn't actually work on *Disappearing World* but I spent two years working as a researcher in television and my supervisor Edmund Leach said that anthropologists should not spend their life in the academy. Anthropologists should be out in the world, being among people and understanding from their perspective. He thoroughly supported the fact that I didn't want to pursue a narrow academic career. Through that work in television I met the writer C. L. R. James, who is one of the most important black intellectuals of the XX century and he had ended up in London in his eighties and wanted someone to help write his autobiography. I worked for James for six years until he died in 1989. I edited a lot of his work. I learned a lot from that experience, which was really remarkable. One thing that I learned that actually matters if you were an anthropologist, I mean, James in his own career had begun as a novelist and a short story writer. He had moved to London in 1932, being a Caribbean intellectual he had to make his way as a writer of fiction. He saw that what he was doing as a novelist and short stories writer was creating an ethnography of backyard life in the Caribbean in the 1920's and he remained interested in the details of people's lives throughout his life. He did a lot of intense theoretical work on Marxism on questions of revolution, but he never lost sight of details of peoples' lives and being interested in that. He persuaded me to write my book "Servants of The Buddha" (1994). He said: look, you had this really unusual experience, you learned a lot by living with those women. So, I had to get rid of all my PhD ideas and start again. It took ten years between doing the fieldwork and finishing that book, to somehow unravel the ways that I had come to shape my ethnographic experience in accordance with academic anthropology in order to then be able to write it in a way that made sense. James convinced me to think again about anthropology and to think about what its purpose was. That was an important step towards going back into anthropology.

What type of change in that redirection of your PhD thesis did you do in this case? It was a change in the style of writing, but also this theoretical background that was not unusual at the time?

It was really going back to focusing the writing on my experience and on my memory of the experience, so I wasn't attempting to accurately recover what happened but I was interested in exploring how I remembered what happened and the distortions of those memories. The scenes in the book are all scenes that I recall but I'm not saying that they are literal descriptions. They are how I remembered them, so that was a kind

of exciting approach to me. To stop worrying about whether I properly remember... Because when I began to think about writing the book I gathered my notes, I gathered letters from people. I then I just thought: forget about it. I'm just going to work with how I remember, what I feel about remembering. Once I started that process, you know it took on a life of its own.

How do you see the role of fiction in anthropological production and how do you see the changing in the acceptance of fiction at that time and now? If we establish differences between Literature and Anthropology, we can say that Anthropology has a connection with the “real” experience and in fiction or Literature you can “create” more, broadly speaking. But you are talking about combining these approaches.

Yes, and in between. I tend to avoid the word “fiction” in relation with anthropology because people tend to have too many preconceptions that it’s somehow untrue. I prefer Ingold's word "craft", that we're crafting work as anthropologists. It’s just that the materials we use are found in the world, it doesn’t mean we can’t do something with them but with a slightly different perspective from a novelist who doesn’t feel obliged to take materials from the world, but there are many overlaps. I think what’s important is that anthropologists have to acknowledge that they are choosing, shaping, crafting the materials that they bring together into some kind of ethnography.

And the idea of this notion of "real” that is we can also put some critique on or at least think better about it. How do you see the change in this acceptance the production of this type of anthropology now and then?

Writing Culture certainly changed everything. That was a landmark book and suddenly things were out in the open about writing and about the construction of texts. Of course, there are very innovative texts these days such as Anna Tsing, Katy Stewart, Ruth Behar, Lila Abu-Lughod and others. I mean, there are people who are experimenting with texts but of course it’s all people who are already established. I think that it’s still hard for graduate students to propose something unconventional. I wish we could encourage more; I wish we did encourage more. It seems to me that we have still got this idea: "once you get tenure, when you get some kind of credential you can do whatever you want." If you look at PhD programs, they don’t encourage

creativity, they train you do things in a particular way, you learn how to do it but you don't start thinking beyond that, and it's too bad.

How do visual and images, photographs and film appeared in your career?

Well, I didn't really think about film and photography until I became a visual anthropologist. I was trained like everybody else to not pay any attention to film and photography. The first ethnographic films were shot by people coming from Cambridge. I never saw them, I never heard anything about them. Our library was called "the Haddon Library" I didn't know he had been one of the first people to use a camera in fieldwork. So was a curious coincidence. What happened was after C.L.R. James died I made a decision: I was not going to continue to work on his work. I was going to have make a different kind of life for myself and a job came up at the *Granada Center* in Manchester. They wanted somebody who had a PhD in Anthropology and had some media or film-making experience and at that time there's only a few people [with that profile]. I got on that shortlist because I spent two years at Granada Television, not that I ever made a film but I knew something about how television worked. So, for me what was exciting about the position was that I got to spend a year at the *National Film and Television School*, where they had a very unusual documentary department. The people who were the leading teachers of documentary at the Film School had worked with David and Judith MacDougall, with James Blue with a whole series of filmmakers at UCLA in the 1960's They had moved to Britain in the 1970's. I was very lucky to be at the Film School under Herb Di Gioia and Collin Young. I realized that the way they thought about documentary was exactly how I was thinking as an anthropologist, there was a kind of perfect match. I found it very exciting because I certainly thought with my interests in working with specific people and the details of their lives, that film was a great medium. I was partly self-taught, partly trained at the school and then of course I taught for many years and I learned through looking at many films, student projects and developing my own practice.

Getting to know your work through reading your books on courses it's possible to notice that you have an effort to create an intellectual community around Visual Anthropology. Presenting the classical references, such as the MacDougalls or Jean Rouch for example. Can you talk about you learning from the experience but also producing knowledge to create this community around this field?

Yes, my own practice and my writing were totally connected. In developing my filmmaking practice I needed to understand about other people's practice and when I joined the Granada Center (which was something around 1990) it was very rare to see films -- particularly Jean Rouch films. There were collections of essays (Hockings, 1975). Peter Loizos's book came out in 1992 but that was the first full length attempt to give an account of this field. So, I felt very strongly that for myself but also for my students, we needed to understand how these different practitioners came together. What was their history? What was their context? So that really was the drive behind *The Ethnographer's Eye*. All my writing continues to be about making the case for the legitimacy of film and to do that you have to have a written discourse, you have to find ways of connecting work and creating a history that people can work with in their own practice and in their own thinking about anthropology.

Could you discuss about this effort to acquire legitimacy and about what type of legitimacy do we still need as visual anthropologists and what are our challenges?

Well, I think one of the big problems that remains is how to create a dialogue with people who don't use visual material, because I think we, on the visual side, are very good at talking with each other and being able to expand our understanding of what we can do using visual media. What still remains difficult is to bridge the divide and to make people who do not work with visual media see that there are ways that these visual approaches can show different sides to an issue, and can challenge textual anthropology in different ways. The fact that we still have a divide and I think we do, whatever people say. I mean, who cites a film as legitimate reference in an article? No one. Who would cite David MacDougall's *To Live With Herds* (1972) in something they might be writing on political economy? They would cite a book, but they wouldn't cite that film. I still think that we are quite a long way from people taking seriously film and working with film to see what *To Live With Herds* might do to open new perspectives on questions to do with modernization, pastoralism or whatever. So that's probably why I focus my attention on undergraduates because unless starts down there it's not going to get up there. All my writings are about trying to get people interested. I mean sometimes the problem is that people who don't work with visual media they think "well I don't know what to do with a photographic essay" or "I don't know what to do with a film". So, some of the writing is about creating a bridge, so that they can approach a work that looks unfamiliar. I think that's really important for us to move

across different languages so to speak and enable people to work productively with non-conventional forms.

And this includes technical formation in this type of analysis? What type qualities abilities do you think it is important to develop, since the beginning of the formation, a visual anthropologist that consider visual as a source of anthropological knowledge.

Knowing how to read them. I mean, there is more to film than just the term "reading" but again, the ability to be able to understand why a film is constructed in a particular way, what techniques may be as ways of knowing, as knowledge techniques. People talk quite often about visual anthropology in general terms, they don't give you a specific example. Again, the film is often thought of in terms of its content, not as a knowledge structure. So, someone might refer *To Live in Herds*, or Jean Rouch but they would not often say that what was really interesting about it is how it is put together, what the analytical framework is in this particular construction. I spend a lot of time in the details of films because I think that's where we have to start our understanding, really knowing how something is put together.

It is the ability of having different sets of criteria to be able to understand that's knowledge?

It is not about criteria whether we can judge if it is anthropology or not. It's about having the critical tools to be able to work with a text whether is a visual text or a written text. Knowing what a hand held camera is, what's going on when something is shot by hand-held camera and opposed to a camera on a tripod, multiple camera angles, all these things that David MacDougall has written about. People often aren't even aware that these are choices.

What is your relation with the United States? From when you came to your projects in the present moment.

It took me a while to figure it out, once I left Britain, where or how I was going to continue my research. In 2004 or 2005 I bought this house in Maine, it was a kind of a chance thing. It wasn't something I particularly planned and in many ways it was a totally different kind of community, fishing community, from anything you find in Britain or Europe. There are really significant differences between how Americans think

about guns, about taxes, about government -- so that was quite stimulating. In other ways, it was similar to me because it is a working class community. It is a place where people work hard, working with their hands, you know, as fisherman largely. I always liked working class culture, I always found it rich. I was fascinated with how people live in that particular environment, what it means, how you do your work, how do you understand the tides, the seasons, the natural elements. Filmmaking became a way of finding out. A way of really trying to understand who people were, how they thought of themselves and how they made community with one and another. My films are really about that.

How about the relation between fieldwork and filmmaking, how the camera enters in your ethnographical practice?

It's always hard. I mean in every case, working in Maine but also when I made my films in Britain. I have to make case to people why I want to make a film. It has to make sense in their terms. What I realized, certainly in Maine, is that people are pleased that someone takes them seriously, someone thinks there are worthy of spending a long time with and trying to learn from and not coming in and just disappearing after a few days of shooting. I commit to a long period of time and I'm willing to learn. People appreciate that, the fact that I am patient and that I am willing to follow their agenda. The film becomes sort of a cultural record, some of the people in my films are no longer alive, so the films create an archive for the community.

It is interesting to know that your filmmaking has a relation with the collective memory of the communities that your study. So, you are working in Maine right now, producing this novel, like you said, a visual novel. And these are movies that are related with the theme of work, right? Which other themes appears on your film production?

I have seven films about a lobster fisherman. I think of it as a film about gender, about men growing old and how they look after each other, how they create community together. It is certainly about fishing but it's more than that. It's about aging and vulnerability, it is about this central character and the kinds of relationships and the kinds of focus he is for relationships. The film I made with the clam digger which is a single film, but it has four short films within it, is really about work and about the choreography of digging and the sense of time and movement and so on. It's a more

abstract film. And then, the film with Coperthwaite [*Mr Coperthwaite: a life in the Maine Woods*] -- it's about how he lives in the woods . It is also about time and aging.

I am constantly thinking about how to dialogue with persons that are workers and how the image of work is constructed. How images are important for them, to say work as a phenomenon of identity.

Well, you know, these guys are all part of an industrial system but the work they are doing is hand-made work. You know, clam digging if you see that film, there is no technology really, but of course clams are sold in the market, just like lobsters but a lot of their work is taking stuff from the environment. But yes they are part of the capitalist economy for sure, but they are not like factory workers or Uber workers, they are actually making or digging. That's one of the things that I find film has enabled me to really explore -- how people worked with the material conditions of their lives and how they know what to do, how they pass that knowledge on to other generations and a lot of it is unspoken – it is just in how they do it, in the way they move, in the way they know how to do to things. Film can draw attention to this.

With your experiences of filmmaking, teaching and writing about visual anthropology I want to get back and ask you about the efforts of teaching to work with different kinds of material since undergraduate.

Well, my approach is simple, every course I teach has to have a range of different kinds of materials so that students just become familiar with being able to read a book, look and discuss a photo essay, being able to move into considering film as contributing to whatever the topic of the course is. Of course, there is still a place for specialized visual anthropology courses that might look at a whole body of classical work but more broadly I don't see why any anthropology course can't include other kinds of materials that enable us to think about different perspectives. I have taught a course called "The Craft of Ethnography" in which we look at textual and visual ethnographies and think—about how anthropologists structure their fieldwork into particular kinds of forms. I don't see why any undergraduate course can't involve students moving across different media.

To finish, what do you want to leave as a message or advice for students who want to initiate in the field of visual anthropologists and for someone that maybe interest in getting to know your work.

My advice will be to be bold. I have been complaining about the conventions of anthropology but on the other hand anthropology is a very expansive approach to the world. There is no fixed way of doing it. The way I worked is because I think that is the best approach given where I am working and with whom. This is always a question to ask if you are doing research. What makes more sense? Like Steven Feld (1991), it really makes sense, if you are working in a rainforest to do your anthropology in the medium of sound because that's the medium that people are working in. My other advice to people who teach is really try to open their courses to other media, other forms and explore them with their students that are often in advance in their facility with media. Anthropology has to seem like a contemporary activity, not stuck in the past.

The persons that we do research with are using a lot of sound, visual...

Of course, of course. But, you know, there is a lot of unhappiness with anthropology right now, certainly in the US but you know you have to find what it is about anthropology that you feel that is really important as a way of being in the world and understanding the world. Of course, all disciplines have their problems they all have their problematic histories but I still think that anthropology is an important way of thinking about the world.

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