

## media

### Before Picking Up the Camera

My Process  
to Ethnographic Film

*Harjant S. Gill*

**W**hen I am teaching visual anthropology or screening my work, students or audience members often ask me to identify the most important ingredient in making an ethnographic film. The ethnographic genre encompasses diverse sensibilities and styles of nonfiction film, and the process of filmmaking is just as varied. My approach and process as an ethnographic filmmaker are constantly evolving. What I know has largely been informed by 12 years of experience working on various film productions, ranging from experimental shorts made with handheld flip-cams to big-budget indie features. With each production I learn something new, but I can pinpoint two essential stages in my overall process. I find these stages the most challenging, and they are places where I invest the greatest concentration. The first is identifying and committing to a theme or topic that I am interested in exploring. The second is the process of pre-interviewing and transcribing, where I figure out the story I want to tell before conducting on-camera interviews. Both stages are crucial, and ironically, both occur before I even start filming.

### Finding a Topic

Although new film ideas occur frequently in my mind while conducting fieldwork or while reading, listening to the radio or thinking about something someone mentioned in a conversation, it often takes a couple of years before I commit to turning one of them into a film. Inspired by Anne Lamott's advice on writing (1994), I always carry a stack of 3 by 5-inch notecards and a pen with me. I have them in my car, in my bag, in my pockets, on my desk, and whenever I think of a project that might be worth exploring, I write it down. I have stacks of notecards with several words or sentences scribbled on them that I return to from time to time. This process helps me reflect on what I had initially observed, with the possibility of exploring it further. I often revisit this stack when I come across a grant opportunity and try expanding it into a research proposal and documentary treatment. I tell my students that writing a documentary treatment often feels like drawing a map without having explored the entire terrain. It is an exercise that will get them heading in one direction, and once they get started on their journeys, they are free to forge different paths along the way. So my initial treatments are frequently based on what I have read or other ethnographers' accounts of a given cultural phenomenon. As I write, I am aware that the likelihood of my project changing significantly is high, especially once I start conducting pre-interviews. I have abandoned several projects at this stage because I realized that my initial idea was not feasible or simply not that interesting. The pro-

cess of deciding which topic to develop into a documentary is challenging because making a film requires a prolonged period of commitment (emotional and financial) that filmmakers must sustain through production, postproduction and distribution. I only take a project on when I am willing to commit at least six to twelve months to developing, shooting and editing a half-hour film. Once a film is finished, on average I spend another two years showing it at various film festivals and academic conferences, which often leads to television screenings and distribution on DVD. The process of distribution is labor intensive and time consuming. Unlike books and journal articles, which enjoy an established readership, ethnographic film lacks the formal infrastructure that would ensure steady viewership. Ethnographic filmmakers often have to find audiences by being their own cheerleaders and communicating why their films matter.

While distribution has its constraints, for me, making and showing films is more rewarding than publishing an article. I reach a far greater audience through my films than through my writings. Because the medium of film creates such a visceral relationship to the viewer, at screenings I get to see how audience members really react to my work. I can engage them in a dialogue during the Q&A session also. Unlike writing a paper or book, where my time is perhaps the most valuable asset, material expenses related to making, editing, distributing and publicizing an independent film can really pile up, typically surpassing the amount I had initially budgeted. I have never realized significant monetary profit from distribution of

my films. However, the shifting technological landscape is making it easier and easier to produce high-quality films on meager budgets. I am regularly amazed by what my students accomplish with limited resources, but this is a double-edged sword. While access to high-quality cameras and editing software has become more egalitarian, improvements in the overall content and themes that some films explore remain less consistent. Having served on several festival juries, I frequently encounter films made by novice filmmakers who are seduced by the visual beauty of their footage, yet their central themes, main narratives and core of their films remain underdeveloped. I too have made similar mistakes in learning to become a more effective filmmaker, and now I work hard early on to ensure that I have something to say before picking up my camera.

Traumatic loss is a catalyst and theme in most of my work. A number of my films came to fruition while exploring tragic incidents of violence and death, which mark the violation or loss of certain notions I had grown up with such as nationhood, security, family biography, religious identity, citizenship or belonging. Exploring these topics through the medium of film serves as a way of attempting to rationalize or create some sort of meaning around that loss. The brutal beating and murder of University of Wyoming college student Matthew Shepard, who became the martyred symbol of the gay men of my age, served as inspiration for my first film, *Everything*, and also informed segments of my subsequent documentary *Milind Soman Made Me Gay* (see



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Film still 1. Milind Soman *Made Me Gay* (2007).

film still 1). My earlier film, *Some Reasons for Living*, which started out as a portrait of two transgender women's lives, gained the emotional immediacy from yet another brutal hate crime that occurred while I was filming the documentary, the murder of a transgender teen in California named Gwen Araujo.

Communal violence and religious persecution of Sikhs in North India during the 1980s is a reoccurring theme in a few of my films, since the trauma of that violence continues to influence the lives of my participants living in this region. My most recent documentary, *Roots of Love* (see film still 2) mourns a more existential loss, the loss of a

religious symbol and faith symbolized by the unshorn hair and turban most young Sikh men in North India grow up embodying. The decision of a young Sikh man to cut off his hair, after it has been lovingly cared for by his mother throughout childhood and deeply invested in as a symbol of communal identity, is seen within many Sikh families as equivalent to having "committed a murder."

My current project, *Mardistan (Manland)*, (see film still 3) is a critical look at North Indian masculinity, a topic that simmered in my mind as possibly worthy of filmic exploration for a few years, but which boiled over when I learned about the death

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*Film still 2. Roots of Love (2011).*

of Nirbhaya, the young medical student who was brutally assaulted and gang-raped in Delhi in December 2012. My films are not glorified exposés of hate crimes or murders, nor are they celebrations of victimhood. Instead, I often search for ways to move past the traumas of these violent incidents and try to find ways to make sense of the seemingly senseless violent acts through my films.

### Conducting Pre-interviews

While a video camera is a powerful tool for capturing a cultural reality, I believe it should not be the first tool an ethnographer

deploys while conducting fieldwork. I have seen many students and novice filmmakers make the mistake of entering their field sites with a video camera in one hand and a microphone in the other. Even in rural villages of India that lack basic infrastructure, individuals are intimately familiar with digital technologies such as the camera, audio recorder and cell-phone camera. Communities across the world are becoming more and more aware of the power media technologies have in influencing how they are represented (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002). Most of my participants are also aware of the position of power I hold when wielding a camera at a social gathering or an event. When bringing a camera to



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Film still 3. *Mardistan [Manland]* (2014).

the field, I deliberately make it a point to put it away until I have developed a relationship with my participants and conducted all of the pre-interviews. Building rapport with my participants, getting to know them, earning their trust and communicating my sincerity and willingness to listen to their stories are the crucial first steps to ethnographic film. The same is true for ethnographic writing.

In this sense, filmmaking does not replace the traditional methodological approaches to research; it builds on them. My films have followed lengthy periods of fieldwork where the primary goal was to develop an article or write a thesis. Before I shot *Roots of Love*, I spent 12 months conducting doctoral research in the same re-

gion. While the written dissertation is a broader analysis of the migration-related decisions made by Punjabi men, the 26-minute film explores a relatively narrow sliver of these men's experiences, focusing exclusively on the practices related to their bodily appearance and religious identity. Exploring the topic in depth first through written ethnography freed me from the compulsion to provide too much context and resist the tendency to over-explain. Instead, I could focus solely on capturing and showing their experiences.

After making initial contact and developing a relationship with my participants, I conduct very loosely structured pre-interviews where we have a conversation and I listen to what they have to say. I employ the

usual elicitation devices (photographs, newspaper articles, references to certain events or popular cultural forms) to steer the conversation toward the topic I am interested in discussing. Since critical discussion of masculinity and sexuality are not everyday topics among young Punjabi men, in addition to asking them what they believe “it means to be a man in India,” I try to collect anecdotal evidence by eliciting memories about “the first time in their childhood that they realized they are different from their female siblings,” or “What are some of the things that you can do as a man, that you wouldn’t be able to do as a woman?” I record these conversations on an audio recorder, reviewing and transcribing them later. Conducting and reviewing these initial pre-interviews is perhaps the most important part of my process. It guides me to my story and assists me in identifying the overarching themes and narrative details along with previously overlooked areas of exploration. Pre-interviews also give me the opportunity to get a sense of how the participants and their surroundings will appear and sound on film. I often carry a still camera with me. I take pictures of participants’ surroundings, documenting the kind of light available for the shoot and any artifacts and material culture that I can use for cutaways. Once I have transcribed and analyzed my pre-interviews, I rewrite my treatment based on the new knowledge I gathered during this first phase of filmmaking.

Also at this stage, I use transcripts from the pre-interview to develop a more structured set of questions for on-camera interviews, highlighting specific themes that I want the participants to focus on and spe-

cific stories I want them to re-tell. In this sense, the process of coding and interpreting interview data, which in a traditional ethnography largely follows fieldwork, is simultaneously ongoing throughout production. By selecting specific themes, asking participants to focus on selective experiences and exploring certain memories, I am imposing my interpretation of a given topic or cultural phenomenon onto what will ultimately end up on camera and on the screen. This makes it more difficult to have the theoretical distance and the time to think and reflect associated with writing an article.

The pre-interview process also helps me reflect on issues of representation. I can see if my participants are presenting themselves in the same way they had appeared initially. This helps to keep my personal biases from seeping into how they are being represented on camera, and signals if they are drastically changing the stories they told initially, perhaps to appear more likeable or more politically correct. For example, while looking for participants for my latest film *Mardistan*, I met a young Punjabi musician who spoke eloquently during his pre-interview about the hyper-sexualized and misogynistic discourses deployed by Punjabi pop stars and how some of their lyrics promote sexual assault and rape. Yet, during his on-camera interview he referred to the same musicians as “flavorful, unique and creative,” and “as being misunderstood by their critics.” I suspect that he altered his narrative from fear that publically critiquing established Punjabi musicians might limit his opportunities within a fairly insular industry. Needless to say, I excluded most of his interview from the final version of the film. But if I had not

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taken the time to get to know him and conduct and transcribe the pre-interview, I might have failed to notice the disjuncture between what he believes and what he stated for the record.

Being able to show this disjuncture between what is said (the rhetoric) and what is done (the lived practice) is, in my view, the hallmark of successful ethnography. For an ethnographic filmmaker, this task is made even more challenging because one has to show it through the participant's responses and actions. Unlike writers, filmmakers cannot simply interject themselves into an interview sequence and guide the audience toward a specific interpretation. Conversely, as an ethnographer, I am always concerned not to misrepresent my participants, a concern that I too frequently see conventional documentary filmmakers and journalists side-stepping.

Issues of representation and authenticity require a thoughtful reflexive approach on the part of the ethnographic filmmaker. Unlike written ethnographic texts where the reader is more aware of the author's presence, the medium of film has the tendency

to lull the audience into a sense of uncritical complacency. It is easy to accept filmic representations as the “truth” when presented in the participant's own voice, without thinking about how a film has been edited together to construct a particular narrative. For these reasons, having my participants preview my films before they are released to the larger audience is an obligatory step in my overall process of ethnographic filmmaking. These issues related to representation resurface every time I pick up a camera or sit down to edit a film. But having transcripts of pre-interviews in-hand while shooting, and later while editing, helps me prevent these mistakes and remain committed to capturing the truth as best I understand it and showing it in the participants' own voices.

Another practical advantage of conducting pre-interviews and using them to develop on-camera interviews is that both the ethnographer and the participant can anticipate each others' questions and responses, keeping the on-camera interview succinct and on topic. Seasoned documentarians often stress the importance of keeping the “shooting ratio”—the total length of the footage shot over the length of the final cut—low, with the rationale that the more hours of footage one shoots, the more time one will have to spend logging and editing that footage (Artis 2008, Rabiger 2009). For independent filmmakers like me who edit their own films, keeping the shooting ratio low also makes the tedious process of reviewing, coding and analyzing that footage more manageable. However, being conservative in the amount of footage one collects should always be balanced with the kind of access one has to shoot, and possibly

reshoot, in a specific location or among a specific community. While shooting *Roots of Love* and *Mardistan* I often recorded more footage than what was needed simply because I was shooting in India and editing back in the U.S., making the possibility of re-shooting certain segments logistically more difficult.

## Conclusion

The sensorial qualities of film and images create a type of immediate intensity that traditional forms of ethnographic story-telling eventually achieve through gradually building up detailed descriptions in the text. Another difference is that the print medium allows authors to supply needed context and create a theoretical distance from the material, which is less possible in an ethnographic film without relying on clichéd expository techniques such as the voice-of-god narration and overuse of texts and graphics, which defeat the cardinal “show-not-tell” rule of filmmaking. Despite (or perhaps because of) these fundamental distinctions, I believe that these forms—textual, pictorial and cinematic—are complementary and it is unwise to privilege one over another.

Conducting pre-interviews before picking up the camera is very useful in collecting concrete interviews, where I can engage in the larger task of creating meaning before starting production, as well as anticipate uncertainties and mitigate challenges that might arise on the actual day of the shoot. By doing this early on, I often find myself more in control of the production, and conversely more free to focus on the serendipi-

tous moments and what David MacDougall calls “the gifts of circumstance,” using direct cinema styles and techniques while shooting non-interview-driven segments of my films.

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**Harjant S. Gill** is assistant professor of anthropology at Towson University, Maryland. His research examines the intersections of masculinity, modernity and migration in South Asia. He has

made several films that have been screened at film festivals worldwide and won numerous awards. His latest documentary release, *Roots of Love*, explores the changing significance of hair and turban among Sikhs. It is being aired in 2014 on *BBC World News*, *BBC America*, Doordarshan (Indian National TV) and on PBS channels nationwide. Gill also co-directs and serves on the jury of the Society for Visual Anthropology Film and Media Festival (SVAFF). His website is [www.TilotamaProductions.com](http://www.TilotamaProductions.com)