



Eleven Hours and Thirty-Eight Minutes: Extraction, Continuous Filming and Description

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ABSTRACT

In this short account the authors present the filmic experiment they carried out in 2016: it was an uninterrupted film lasting for 11 hours 38 minutes, unedited and accessible in its entirety. Of the two authors, one was the filmer and the other was filmed. They use the notion of extraction to understand the whole process: i.e. the film itself, the decoding of the images, and the text description. The aim is to present the human being as a unit extracted—what they call a “volume of being”—from its contexts and situations in order to be considered in itself.

KEYWORDS

Continuity; description; day; existential anthropology; details

“If you have lived one day, you have seen everything. One day equals all the days” (Montaigne 1991, 104).

Our Approach

Before presenting our film experiment, which took place on 19 January 2016, we should make two remarks. First, the theoretical basis of this experiment is the idea that most of the empirical units of the world—atom, molecule, cell, neuron, psyche, social relations, institution, universe—have their scientific specialists, while there is none for the human unit that we call “volume of being” (VoB)¹ This has been one great avoidance of anthropology, a subject that has always looked at human beings together, or as part of sundry activities, situations and contexts which play a major role in description and analysis. Secondly, the fact that, for this experiment, one of us, Albert Piette, the anthropologist, is filmed by two artists, Catherine Beaugrand and Samuel Dématraz, does not alter the theoretical and methodological stakes.

This experiment consists of a film lasting for 11 hours 38 minutes, uninterrupted, unedited and accessible in its entirety: it is entitled *Réellement, douze heures*.² The anthropologists who volunteered to carry out this experiment were ultimately reluctant to do so, but a chance meeting between Catherine Beaugrand, a visual artist, and Albert Piette easily set the filming process in motion. The agreed principle was clearly laid down: the continuity of moments, losing nothing as the seconds passed, and focusing

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on Albert Piette. A date was proposed: 19 January. Piette knew that on that day he would be giving a five-hour lecture on “Observation and Description” to a group of Master’s students in the Anthropology Department at Nanterre, just outside Paris. The plan for that day was as follows: breakfast at Piette’s place, a flat in the southern suburbs of Paris, train journey from Bourg-la-Reine to Nanterre University, with a change at the central Châtelet station, then the lecture, interrupted by lunch, then back to Piette’s place, some work on the computer, and finally dinner. Beaugrand summed up the project in these words, written before 19 January:

What we want to achieve is uninterrupted continuity of face and body, never losing face and hands in the rhythm of walking and activities. We want to be at the service of your project, even if it interests me in many ways. The tools used to record the image need to be thought through very precisely: in particular, the image needs to be retrieved immediately by another camera so that the thread is absolutely continuous—this is not an edit, just an end to end. Filming continuity means anticipating the locations. If this is not anticipated, simply following will not produce the continuity of reality.

The idea of extraction enables us to grasp the various issues and to understand the specific nature of this experiment. We contrast abstraction with extraction, based on the difference between the Latin prefixes; for *ex-* designates an *exit*, while *ab-* designates a removal. Exit implies that the being extracted carries what it is and what it has at the moment of extraction. It is extracted from somewhere and it carries that “somewhere.” Abstraction, starting from nowhere, presents a *de facto* indefinite being. The refusal or risk of abstraction may well have discouraged anthropologists from taking such a radical interest in a human entity, associating it with its situation in the world, in cultures, in social systems, thinking that all this thus guaranteed its empirical specificity.

Extraction has another strength, because it is not only the equivalent of choosing (as some anthropologists do) to work on one person. In reality, focusing on an individual does not avoid the significant presence of other beings in descriptions and analyses, despite the priority given to one figure. Extraction is an exit movement of a particular being, whereas focusing is a movement toward a being. This also means that the illumination, interpretation or explanation resides in the entity itself. To extract is to work on a volume of being in its entirety without giving primacy to experiences and consciousness, and without reintegrating “the others” and the events taking place around the chosen figure. The extraction thus posed is a kind of existential reduction. This would be the objective and the challenge of existential anthropology, which calls for a rigorous methodology.

In this short article we do not develop the theoretical conceptualization that was prompted by this film experiment and that is still in progress (but see Piette 2017, 2024), aimed at providing the conceptual tools for describing and analyzing a volume as a structured totality. Here we want to show at a methodological level the deployment of the extraction in three stages: namely the film, the decoding of the images, and the description.

Continuous Filming

Continuous filming in successive situations, from moment to moment, is the basic gesture for extracting a VoB from its context, or more precisely from its contexts. It is not this or that activity, or this or that place, or this or that role, of the individual that is

being targeted. The film does not therefore take a broad or all-encompassing view. If, for example, a camera had been placed in such-and-such a place, its focus would have been different, capturing what was happening in the situation and thus reintroducing the context of an activity. This follow-up from situation to situation helps to de-situate the volume so that it remains the central figure, extracted from the different contexts through which it passes. While in our film different backgrounds scroll by, the VoB seems more in time than it is in the world. The tracking of the VoB, thus fixed by the camera in medium or close-up, draws like a kind of unbroken thread. By following a deliberately chosen person in this way, we maintain his extraction from situation to situation, as if he were beyond the scenes.

The film presents itself as a recording of the continuity of a VoB. It is this being that is and remains the scale of the gaze and of the analysis, from beginning to end, without departing from this principle. A film of this kind cannot be considered a documentary—one, for example, about the life of a teacher or a resident of the Parisian suburbs.³ If it is a documentary, it is about being and continuity, or about a methodology, that of a “radical empiricism” (we weigh our words), and thus about anthropology or a form of anti-anthropology (by analogy with Warhol’s “anti-films”).⁴

What is more, we see the person being filmed acting without seeing what he is seeing. The fact that there is no counter-field was mentioned in previous discussions between us. Such a counter-field would have required the use of a Gopro. Technically it would have filmed most of the filmers in the act of filming, as they are usually facing the person being filmed. Above all, though, incorporating what the subject sees complicates the intended focus on the subject and risks once again decentering the viewer’s gaze toward the context. In this way we can see the strength of such an experiment, its limits, the impossibility of knowing everything, but also the possibility of constantly adding different points to improve it.

From a methodological perspective, this type of filmic process excludes a sharing of experiences and activities that would draw the filmer into a relational play. Nor does the viewer feel any particular empathy, as might be the case if the film were presented as recounting the day of such-and-such an individual—the title then specifying such a theme transformed into a “story.”

Ideally we should observe each human entity of an interaction one at a time, but separately, in order to decipher the entity of which the interaction is only a part. And then follow each of them for as long as possible... This could constitute collaborative research, with each person, for example, following a different entity from the previous interaction. But at some point what to do... given the multiplication of contacts and the emergence of new entities?

Still Images and Decoding

Filming continuously without any editing means recording life without halting, with the idea or objective that there can be no wasted time. So how do you move continuously from one image to another, in description and analysis? It is important to distinguish between a discontinuity of images that creates an illusion of continuity through editing,

and a real continuity, a series of “nows.” The difficult task of deciphering the succession of still images is the price we have to pay to describe the continuity of the thread.

Extraction is the extraction of a being at moment t and at subsequent moments, each time bearing the marks of those moments and of what the volume contains—which is not completely changed at each moment. These frozen images mean that movement is lost, but they do allow for precise description. As we move from one to the next, we see differences and changes in the being filmed, as well as overlaps and constants. This work on the images brings out the continuity of being, beyond the relations to others beings, without reengaging in the sequence of each situation. It is this non-starting from scratch, in some automaticity, that is really our focus, with its conditions, principles and modalities.

From there it is possible to create a new form of extraction, the cutting-out of the VoB, by abandoning what would remain of the contextual background—once these external elements have been sufficiently identified for our information. The figure “cut out” in this way shows its outline clearly visible and the adherence of the movements to the VoB. It is at this stage that appropriate sketches of mimics and gestures can reveal details of expression and show continuities of style.

Description

“Volumography,” a description of a VoB, does not correspond to the portrait as we find it in anthropology, which keeps important room for the “background.” We liken these portraits to a “perspection,” a look through the individual to understand other things.⁵ This is fraught with difficulties:

- the choice of particular figures (refugees, the sick, etc.) or exemplars of sociocultural characteristics, who impose on the observer their features deemed relevant and for which they have been chosen;
- the restricted focus on a specific “as” with the components of the entity involved in the role and experience under consideration;
- the observation of discontinuous situations, chosen according to a contextual continuity (that of a place, or of a theme) or according to the anthropologist’s research rhythm, rather than according to the strict continuity of the individual’s existence, moment by moment;
- analyzing the impact of a given characteristic on other humans, and *vice versa*;
- placing the social situation or context being illuminated in the foreground, thus relegating the human entity in question to the background;
- note-taking and recollection alone—the ABCs of ethnography—are insufficient to build a true observation of a human being;
- the place given to the anthropologist—including himself or herself in his or her text and making his or her subjectivity explicit in his or her own relation with the chosen individual—is a further reason for diluting the human entity itself.

Volumography is not a biography or a life story which presupposes a narrative between discontinuous and reorganized situations or moments around a theme articulating the

data, whether it belongs to the classic monographs or to the alternative montages in the way of presenting a “story.”⁶ Volumography has the opposite characteristics.

Our film generated over almost twelve consecutive hours over 130 pages of “raw” description of the Piette volume. It takes the form of a succession of “verbs” describing actions with a certain level of detail on the modes of presence. It is a second movement—with just as many pages—that completes it with the “substantive” and what it contains, in particular the stylistic traits and characteristics that are specific to it, the feelings or thoughts, and so on from moment to moment, showing a permanence of certain traits (for all this information, cf. Piette 2017). In this sense, insofar as film allows a close-up of the individual and the researcher describes and analyzes in detail the uninterrupted continuity of his or her modes of presence, it constitutes a methodological break that avoids the more or less imprecise tone⁷ of descriptions that in fact contribute to the loss of the entity.

In description the situation-context is always secondary. It is a minimal but sufficient piece of information, like stage-directions for a play. So our description includes only the prerequisites of the time and place where the VoB⁸ is located. In this description, what belongs to the contextual background is blurred. It may simply be mentioned in the logical follow-up to the description; for example, an element of the immediate environment that solicits Piette or that he solicits. This is true of the objects he is handling, but also of the people he is talking to at one moment, then replaced by others at the next. There are no descriptions of these other people, only an indication of what they say to the person being filmed, because of the need to monitor them and to ensure a minimally legible description. It is important to realize that this information, with the status of stage-directions, does not compromise the extraction operation—which is not the case with the anthropologists’ portraits, where the other entities and the contextual backgrounds remain very much present, as always strongly embedded in the description and analysis.

Coda

We said at the beginning of this discussion that it was not important or significant that Albert Piette was the one being filmed; but this judgment may not be entirely accurate ... Remember the words of Michel de Montaigne:

Those who merely think and talk about themselves occasionally do not examine the basics and do not go as deep as one who makes it his study, his work and his business, who with all good faith and with all his might binds himself to keeping a long-term account [...] With the aim of teaching my mental faculty even to rave with some order and direction and so as to stop it losing its way and wandering in the wind, I need simply to give it body and to keep detailed accounts of my petty thoughts as they occur in me. (Montaigne 1991, 755)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau makes a more flexible proposal: “to keep a faithful record of my solitary walks and of the reveries which fill them” (Rousseau 1992, 12). It is significant, but not surprising, that Claude Lévi-Strauss makes Montaigne (Lévi-Strauss 1995, 208–24) and Rousseau (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 33–43) the founders of the human sciences, the one because of his interest in cannibalism and the other in empathy, without

considering these writings in the first person. On the other hand, according to Maine de Biran, “if we thus had various memoirs made by observers of themselves, what light would shine on the science of man!” (quoted by Devarieux 2015, 117, trans.). This opens up a whole new horizon of work. Freud was not mistaken when he wrote:

Thus it comes about that I am bed to my own dreams, which offer a copious and convenient material, derived from an approximately normal person and relating to multifarious occasions of daily life. No doubt I shall be met by doubts of the trustworthiness of ‘self-analyses’ of this kind; and I shall be told that they leave the door open to arbitrary conclusions. In my judgment the situation is in fact more favorable in the case of self-observation than in that of other people, at all events we may make the experiment and see how far self-analysis takes us with the interpretation of dreams. (2010, 130)

It is important to remember Michel Leiris, who was both an African ethnologist and the author of an autobiographical literary work:

Today I took a shit in such-and-such a manner, I made love in such-and-such a way, I thought that about such-and-such a person, I jerked off, I ate with a good appetite, I laughed at such-and-such stupidity, at such-and-such a moment in the day I thought I had genius, I was flattered by such-and-such a thing someone said to me, I hoped to be published in such-and-such a magazine, by such-and-such a publisher, I was afraid of such-and-such a thing, etc., etc. [...]. You’d have to be able to give a detailed account of an entire day. Describe how one gets up, washes, dresses... what one thinks as one does so, the conversations at and away from the table, the phases of optimism and pessimism that may follow one another in the course of the day, the organic sensations experienced, the memories that come back to us—all this scrupulously recorded, hour by hour. (Leiris 1992, 169, trans.)

But Leiris did not really do this work, which is remarkably suggested in these lines, choosing the narrative for his autobiographical literary work based on the themes that preoccupied him yet showing no specific interest in the individual as an entity in his ethnological research.

Notes

1. Readers can discover in this journal another pertinent essay, with drawings, expanding on the idea of volume of being (or VoB; Piette 2023).
2. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZ3Bv9cK4fo>.
3. There are many documentaries that focus on a single person, over long periods of time, or at intervals. That person is more a “character” than a VoB, with notable political, social or cultural characteristics, to the detriment of the VoB in its entirety. It is then a story that is told, according to a specific montage based on a variety of inclusive shots.
4. Catherine Beaugrand presented an analysis of similar experiments in experimental cinema, discussing the works of Acconci, Mekas or Warhol, and showing the differences from our film, in particular the duration and the principle of montage, which the filmmakers cited do not escape (Beaugrand 2017). See also Torterat (2024) and Schneider (2021) on possible links between experimental cinema and anthropology.
5. For example, Crapanzano (1980), Biehl (2013) or Pandian and Mariappan (2014).
6. On the critique of narrative see, for example, Nina Holm Vohnsen (2018). This is a debate that concerns literature in general and has also concerned anthropology when seeking new forms of writing. See Rose (1993) and Cohen (2013).

7. In Bateson's words: "Until we devise techniques for the proper recording and analysis of human posture, gesture, intonation, laughter, etc. we shall have to be content with journalistic sketches of the 'tone' of behavior" (Bateson 1936, 276).
8. Depending on the degree of strangeness or specificity of the individual (in relation to the anthropologist and his readers), contextual information may be more or less necessary. From our point of view, however, it should not call into question the continuity of the description of a VoB. The continualist methodology can make it possible to see that a volume, at such-and-such a moment, in such-and-such a situation, participates in such-and-such a social code, like other individuals, while being different in such-and-such a way, close to what has been observed previously in other situations of the same volume, and so on. From there, it is up to the anthropologist to always return to the structuring of the entity he is studying, without falling into the "trap" of the priority of other beings, social situations or cultural contexts.

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