

because of increasing corona restrictions, and the presenters from other countries could only participate via the Microsoft Teams video platform, which generated new challenges in solving technical questions – in the end, the autumn school still proved successful. One of the relevant conclusions of the autumn school was that, besides being a medical phenomenon, health has important social, religious, narrative, and material-technological dimensions that need to be taken into consideration in policy-making and research. The event was organised with the support of the European Regional Development Fund (ASTRA project EKMDHUM) and was also related to the project PUTJD962 (Estonian Research Council).

Reet Hiimäe

DOCTORAL THESIS ON THE USE OF OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Liivo Niglas. *In Siberia with a Camera: Observational Documentary as Audio-visual Ethnography*. Dissertationes Ethnologiae Universitatis Tartuensis 12. University of Tartu Press, 2020. 347 pp.

On 14 December 2020, Liivo Niglas defended his doctoral thesis at the University of Tartu. The thesis was supervised by Professor Art Leete, and the opponents were Dr Toomas Gross from the University of Tartu and Dr Pille Runnel from the Estonian National Museum.

Liivo Niglas' doctoral dissertation "In Siberia with a Camera: Observational Documentary as Audio-visual Ethnography" is a voluminous study consisting of an extensive cover text and four research articles published in 2011–2013. It is based on fieldwork carried out approximately within the same time period, which dates back several years. It is this time distance that has probably helped the material to mature and the research problem to crystallize. The result is one of the most interesting doctoral dissertations defended in the field of ethnology at the University of Tartu in recent years. It is important to point out that in all major and minor research projects that have formed the basis of the doctoral thesis, observational ethnographic filmmaking has played an important role, and visual anthropology is actually the core of Liivo Niglas' research approach. The duration of the research projects that are part of the dissertation, and the nature of the research problems closely related to the duration of the projects, have varied to a large extent, ranging from research based on shorter research trips to long-term collaboration with the Forest Nenets Juri Vella, his relatives and community. Such variability adds another dimension to the analysis of the research question under consideration in the doctoral thesis – the opportunities offered by observational ethnographic documentaries as an approach to anthropological research.

Although Liivo Niglas emphasizes in the introductory part of the dissertation the desire to distinguish texts and films as research outputs so that they would be able to

speak to different audiences, it is expedient for those interested in visual anthropology to consider them as a whole. If possible, those interested should simply follow his recommendation that films (which are, before they can be considered as research, still primarily film as an artistic genre) should already be known before one starts to read research articles completed alongside films.

The aim of the doctoral thesis is to analyse the possibilities offered by the ethnographic documentary film in conducting ethnographic research and presenting the results. The author's thesis is that the audio-visual approach provides an important addition to text-centred anthropology in the treatment of certain research topics. Consequently, the focus of the dissertation is not on the cultural analysis of the societies being filmed, but on the question of the ethnographic film from both the methodological and epistemological point of view. The introductory part of the doctoral dissertation is also a theoretical analysis of the research problem and in a sense the author's autoethnography, because unlike, for example, research in the field of film theory, the author has created the object of analysis by himself. It gives him an additional tool to look at the film not only as a finished text, but to approach the film process as a whole, from its preparatory stages to the stages of fieldwork, editing, and reception. Questions about the possibility and justification of non-textual research in anthropology are not new, but Liivo Niglas extends this debate into the present day, where art-based research and artistic approaches to present research results are used as experimental not only in anthropology but also in many related fields ranging from arts research to media and communication research.

However, Liivo Niglas' doctoral dissertation remains consciously within the field of visual anthropology, excluding the proposals made in some of the key debates in this field to reformulate this research domain (e.g. Marcus Banks) and limiting his discussion to the most central part of this approach – the observational ethnographic documentary, by both supporting and deconstructing it. As the author of films, related research articles, and finally the introductory umbrella chapter of his doctoral dissertation, he is able to talk from an analytical point of view to the previous key authors in the field, who have usually been authors and creators of film theory (most importantly Timothy Ash, Anna Grimshaw, Paul Henley, Gary Kildea, Sarah Pink, Jean Rouch, Jay Ruby, Lucien Taylor, and especially David MacDougall). In his doctoral dissertation, Niglas has addressed all major researchers in the field, including visual anthropologists from Europe, Australia, and the USA. In presenting and analysing these views, he also makes significant use of autoethnography – his personal filmmaking experience. He shows convincingly that the anguish of various critics of observational ethnographic films towards this genre (e.g. Banks, Hastrup) is largely unjustified. "Observation" as the starting point of this approach does not signify a passive, absent (positivist) pursuit of objectivity, but is rather an active process across all stages of filming, film editing, and finally reception, in which the physical and sensory aspects of filmmaking play a very important role.

Thus, it can be said that the concept of physicality (and one's body as a research instrument) is at the heart of the dissertation and constitutes a cross-cutting theme in all articles that are part of the dissertation. It should be noted, however, that despite the importance of this topic there is no dialogue with researchers in this field to the same extent as in the field of visual anthropology in the dissertation. The author agrees to the conclusions of his introductory chapter (in which he relies on the analysis of other

theorists as well as his own film practice) that the genre of observational ethnographic film is suitable for analysing and conveying various aspects of human experience, providing good opportunities for several research topics within the field of phenomenological anthropology. Especially, for example, when the goal is to understand bodily experiences, the anthropological understanding of which is difficult to express in words. This gives the research method a potential to address a number of important research questions today (sensations, emotions, material environment). To some extent, the limitation of this approach is its ability to study human agency through just particular people and particular situations which are not necessarily generalizable. Although contemporary applications of innovation in visual anthropology seek to overcome this limitation through other approaches, criticizing ethnographic film as a problematic genre, the author has deliberately left out other approaches from his research. In this way, he has been able to create his own clear view of the border between anthropology and cinema. One of the interesting concepts that emerges here, which could be considered the author's own contribution to the debates within visual anthropology, is his observation that an *ethical-aesthetic* approach is at the heart of observational filmmaking: in order to find the right approach to the research problem with the help of a film camera, the driving force is not research questions or hypotheses characteristic of science, nor, on the other hand, artistic aspirations characteristic of film as an art genre, but ethical choices, which determine Liivo Niglas' attitude as a filmmaker and his relationship with the protagonists, as well as the role that the camera can play in research. However, these choices are also evident in the editing of the film, where his directorial approach is to interfere as minimally with the material as possible and try to respect different views and moments in filming. This includes long shots, following the pace of real life within the length of film frames, which Liivo Niglas has also called 'aesthetics of humbleness'. Finally, it is worth noting that since the very voluminous introductory chapter of the work is written in Estonian, in addition to its research value, the work is also important for teaching visual anthropology in Estonia, because it introduces and synthesizes debates that would otherwise have branched out across the professional literature throughout several decades.

Pille Runnel