I received Charlotte Bates’s kind request to write the conclusion to this fine and timely collection of essays as Jonathan Taggart and I were en route back home after a week spent filming and doing fieldwork on the East Coast of Canada. I hesitated to agree. Though I had been working with Jonathan for over two years on the making of an extensive video documentary production (see chapter 10, this volume) I had always held reservations about the academic establishment of both ethnographic film and video-based data collection methods. In my mind video has always had an enormous potential to affect its audiences—a potential to inform, educate, entertain, transform, and stimulate—but the people least qualified to actualize that potential, I had long been convinced, were academics. So I nervously agreed to write this chapter, presaging that it would inevitably end up being a polemical one focused on the shortcomings of video methods as currently practiced and the still largely unfulfilled potential of video-based scholarship.

My reservations weren’t without their reasons. As a student I had sat through my fair share of projections of classic anthropological films—shaky, drawn-out, rough-sounding, clumsily-edited productions that simultaneously failed to meet my Generation-X-shaped expectations for entertainment and to inform my ethnographic sensitivity better than (often similarly drawn-out) written accounts. Later, as a scholar, I had become well aware of the prevailing social scientific attitude toward research-based film and video production, nicely epitomized by the following prescription:

A static camera mounted on a tripod that does not tilt, pan, zoom, or in any way move is assumed to be the most “scientific” technique and one that is less distorting and more “truthful” in the recording of “natural” behavior than other camera techniques. Moreover the camera must be
allowed to run as long as possible and used in as unobtrusive a manner as possible so that it records unaffected streams of culturally significant behavior (Ruby, 2000, p. 177).¹

In short, it wasn’t unreasonable for me to have grown to believe that the same elitism, the same tendency to preach to the choir, the same realist compulsions, the same lack of imagination, and the same paucity of creative skills that had impacted much of scholarly writing had also severely impacted video-making for research purposes well beyond repair. So I accepted the invitation to write this chapter mostly as an opportunity to catch up with the latest cross-disciplinary developments in the field and perhaps as a way to push my own agenda on non-representational methodology (see Vannini, 2014). Little did I know that an epistemological revolution, as manifested by the contributors to this volume, was actually already in full swing.

As Charlotte Bates points out in her introduction, video methods aren’t what they used to be. And thank goodness for that! Across several disciplines, throughout disparate field sites, and alongside evolving theoretical and methodological traditions, the video methods of the second decade of the twenty-first century are as different from their filmic predecessors as HD DSLR cameras are from the tools of the silent film trade. Gone are the dominant realist and universalizing pretensions to “capture” unbiased versions of reality, gone are the anxieties over aestheticizing knowledge and experimenting with it, and gone are many of the most stringent limitations over dissemination and publication. Video methods are moving at full speed beyond representation, finally beginning to exploit their potential to evoke, communicate multimodally in a sensuous way, and to affect viewers in meaningful, arts-inspired ways. There has never been a better time to practice video methods and to push them to do what they haven’t been pushed to do before.

**Beyond Representation**

¹To be clear, Ruby’s statement is an assessment of what he finds to be a common disposition in anthropological film, and not necessarily his opinion on how things should be.
If all the chapters of this book could be jammed into a word processor programmed to squeeze a single, synthesizing essence out of them then that essence might as well be this: video methods are less useful for “capturing” reality than they are for evoking distinct, multiple, competing, and often even contradictory aural and visual impressions. Allow me, in what follows, to tease out some of the different threads that are knotted through in this statement.

*Evoking, not capturing*

Following the crisis of representation of the 1980s the social sciences have experimented with a multitude of research traditions destined to evoke, animate, expose, impress, unsettle, and rapture reality, rather than “capture” it in older realist, objective, or supposedly authentic ways. Video methods haven’t always been at the forefront of this epistemological revolution. Long condemned for being inferior to the written word, the use of visual imagery and sound in social scientific research has historically struggled to serve as little more than a supplement to print or as teaching or a conference presentation aide. Within ethnography, for example, “visual ethnography” has come to denote written ethnographic accounts accompanied by occasional photographs or (less often) video clips, as well as ethnographic film supported by written “study guides.” For a long time the message underlying visual ethnographic knowledge has been simple: images are seductively dangerous and must be treated gingerly. Images—as the criticism went on—may appear to show truth and evidence, but therein lay their shallowness, for all images deceive and hide. The contributors to this book transcend this skeptical approach to the role of the audiovisual by finally abandoning the pretense of being capable of, and even being interested in, “capturing” reality through images and sound.

In his research in London’s St. Pancras Station and Paris’s Gare du Nord, for example, Simpson utilizes multi-angle video recording and presentation techniques to “approach,” rather than “capture,” ephemeral ambiances and atmospheres. Ambiances and atmospheres—the research project’s social “reality” under focus—are by definition ungraspable, undefinable, and only perceivable as fleeting moods, diffuse feelings, and evanescent sensations. There is nothing, in other words, that can be objectively captured by a camera, by the written word, or any other mode of re-presentation. There the cameras are simply employed to give off a sense of the barely sensible, the intangible, and the un-captured. Cameras then work less as a
“recording” instrument and more of a heteroglossic device capable of creating (not representing, but creating) a feeling of multi-positionality which the technologically-unaided human body cannot otherwise achieve on its own. Thus a multi-angle video creation makes up—through the creative artifice of the montage process—a super-human, panoptic vision which rather than simply observing ends up directing and composing.

“More-than-representational” video methods—to borrow from Lorimer’s (2005) useful moniker—are undoubtedly less the tool of the scientist, the security staff, and the bureaucrat and more that of an artist keen on allowing “the world to appear differently” (Simpson, this volume). I agree here with Simpson wholeheartedly: using video in a non-representational or more-than-representational manner helps us “see [and hear] the world differently from our habitual ways of looking and feeling” (Simpson, this volume). This is a simple lesson which every self-respecting visual artist—from photographers to filmmakers—knows and understands very well: if all that the camera is employed to do is to see something the naked eye can also see on its own, then what is the value? Unfortunately this point has long been lost on social scientists. Boredom—a common response to many traditional social scientific video productions—is precisely the outcome of a viewing experience that discovers nothing new, nothing different, nothing surprising, unsettling, or imaginative in what the camera has been employed to see.

For these reasons I am skeptical about the word “witnessing” (cf. Patchett, this volume). Though I agree with Patchett’s claim—and before her, Dewsbury’s (2003) and Lorimer’s (2010)—that “witnessing” and “exposing” are ideas that transcend the boundaries of representationalism, the notion of witnessing is for me still too anchored in a view of the camera as a replacement for physical presence, sort of a testimonial eye and ear in absentia of the real thing. The video camera is capable of intensifying affect even when one’s own eyes and ears are present—after all who hasn’t experienced different sensations than they did on the field after playing back one’s own footage?—and indeed rather than a witness I wish to think of the camera as a fabricator, a trickster, a storyteller. Video methods are indeed “primarily an art of illusion” (Gallagher, this volume, citing Chion, 1994, p. 96) capable of manufacturing a hyper-reality of their own, not unlike the “enhanced” sound that we—in our hyper-mediated sound environments—have come to think of as high-
fidelity, but which in actuality “may in fact be more accurate described as definition” (Gallagher, this volume).

In short, with the contributors of this volume I view the video camera’s role in the research context not as a reproductive one but as a poietic one, “partly aligned and partly estranged” (Gallagher, this volume) with the subject at which it is aimed. And it is precisely in such slippage between the event-as-unfolded and the event-as-filmed that the non-representational excess comes to a life, in all its enchanting power and multiple functionalities. It is in how it “makes knowledge,” in its production of an audio-visual artefact, that its evocation of a social “reality” can “facilitate an appreciation of the practical, sensual and affective dimensions” (Brown and Banks, this volume) of the practice of filming as much as an inchoate social reality itself.

Affective experimentations

It was only a few years ago that Nigel Thrift and John-David Dewsbury (2000) claimed that cultural geographies were “dead” and that only performative experimental approaches could re-animate them and make their subjects “flirt and flout, gyre and gimble, twist and shout” (p. 412). At the time this pronouncement felt revolutionary to most geographers, but anthropologists and sociologists as well as communication and education studies scholars (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) had been preaching the same message for quite some time already. As a matter of fact, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), post-foundationalist research methods were by then already past the experimental moment, so Thrift and Dewsbury’s incitation—if one is to judge by what was already happening—might have been nothing but a little guarded. Curiously, however, experimentation in video research methods has lagged behind the rest of the performative social sciences and so the calls made by contributors to this volume to be bold and experimental are still both innovative and inspiring.

I too “want to encourage video ethnographers to experiment”—to borrow from Garrett and Hawkins’s words. Experimentation is not only “one of the key skill sets of video ethnographers” (Garrett and Hawkins, this volume) but I firmly believe that creative experimentation through newly-acquired video skills easily translates into learning new writing and data collection skills as well. Video is good to think
with—as I myself have realized after learning to see field sites differently in light of the heightened reflexivity gained through the video camera. Indeed the socio-technological assemblages we operate within as social scientific researchers—whether these include nothing but pen and paper, or a fuller array of advanced digital devices—“are never static, and, as such, we can, and indeed should, work to stretch, extend and mould” (Garrett and Hawkins, this volume) these assemblages in order to device new genres, styles, and goals for our fieldwork. Though we may occasionally fail, there is indeed “much to be gained for video researchers by experimenting with the relationship between audio and image” (Gallagher, this volume). Continued experimentation with diegetic and non-diegetic sound, camera angles, narrative linearity and un-linearity, scene length and juxtaposition has the power to deeply “unsettle and rework” social realities, undoubtedly standing out as “one of the most intriguing and affectively potent aspects of the medium” (Gallagher, this volume).

Nowadays it is all too tempting to say that portable and affordable high-quality sound-recording HD video cameras and Final Cut Pro or Adobe Premiere make it easy to engage in video experimentation. Well, yes they do, but we need to remember that purchasing a brand new pair of parabolic skis won’t turn us all into Olympic downhill skiers. The reality is that the greatest risk to experimentation is the embarrassing amateurism that comes from clueless optimism and excessive self-confidence. As Gallagher reminds us then, the value of collaboration between specialists of different trades cannot be overestimated. Collaborating with professional visual artists—as I myself have learned—allows us to learn new “languages” (to borrow from an overused but still effective metaphor) that can enable us academics to communicate with new audiences. As Jungnickel argues in her chapter, experimentations of various kinds can facilitate the production of courageously complex works that “resist the flattening of live, dynamic processes via a renewed interest in sociological description.” Collaborative experimentations are thus in an advantageous position to animate the messy character of social life and “embrace ‘impossible or barely possible, unthinkable or almost unthinkable’ versions of reality” (Jungnickel, citing Law, 2004, p. 6). Time-lapse videos (Jungnickel, this volume) or research videos that creatively borrow from the style of sleek music or adventure travel videos (Garrett and Hawkins, this volume) are but some of the possible styles likely to
emerge from collaboration, cross-fertilization, and the search for inspiration across disparate fields and traditions.

Experimentation with video—to continue the argument presented in the previous section—can in particular play a key role in transcending the limits of representation. Several of the contributors to the volume find this to be a central benefit of working with video. For example, citing Whatmore (2006), Patchett argues that “in order for academic researchers to embody and enact more-than-human modes of working they must develop and follow an explicitly experimental methodological imperative” (Patchett, this volume) which supplements “the familiar repertoire of humanist methods (which generate text and talk) with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject” (Whatmore, 2006, pp. 606-607, cited in Patchett, this volume). It is outright difficult to disagree with this; as a matter of fact the mark of insanity, to borrow from Albert Einstein, might very well be said the attitude of someone (like a traditional scholar) who keeps doing the same thing in the same way over and over again while expecting different results. Going beyond the stale and conservative representationalism that has characterized the scientific method since its inception can allow us to engage, rather than merely investigate the world (Jungnickel, this volume, citing Lury and Wakeford, 2012, p. 6), and thus reach out to new constituencies. And it can also allow us to connect to more-than-human subject matters that have hitherto been silenced or poorly understood, as several of the contributors remind us (e.g., Brown and Banks, this volume; Patchett, this volume).

An experimental sensitivity, or in other words a willingness to take compositional risks and deviate from the typical expository and overly rational mode of academic rhetoric, is also instrumental in intensifying the affective potential of research-based knowledge. Videos that attempt to “amplify” (Kullman, this volume) rather than merely reproduce the affective intensities that pulse through our daily lives can mobilize old and new audiences alike, with the explicit “potential to bring bodies, images and worlds into new relationships and, in doing so, transform understandings of everyday practices, both visual and otherwise” (Kullman, this volume). Video methods’ affective intensity can then be felt with our bodies in their non-verbal sensual materiality (Latham and McCormack, 2009), thus resulting in the opening up of
thinking spaces for an affective micropolitics of curiosity in which we can remain unsure as to what bodies and images might yet become” (Lorimer, 2010, p. 252).

Making conscious technological and aesthetic choices

One of the key points emerging from the contributions to this volume is to be very careful with our tools. Though we may regard contemporary recording devices and editing software as user-friendly, spotting a first time user is as easy as picking up an accent in someone who has only been speaking a new language for a week. Gallagher’s call to caution on this count is particularly sobering and insightful:

Professional film makers often remark that sound quality is one of the surest ways to distinguish amateur efforts from more serious productions, an observation easily supported by a brief trawl around YouTube. [...] In most cases, leaving audio to take care of itself or hoping for some miraculous post-production quick fix for sloppy sound (if you ever find one, please let me know) is likely to be detrimental to the quality of video research (Gallagher, this volume).

Of course there is no need to despair. Even old dogs can learn new tricks with some patience, dedication, and a good teacher (or a good team of collaborators). The point, however, is that sloppy productions will bring negative light and will cause loss of attention not only onto the producer, but regrettably also onto the methodological field as a whole. Making deliberate, careful, and wise technological choices, therefore, is of the outmost importance.

As opposed to much of the available literature on visual ethnography, visual methods, visual anthropology, and related issues, many of the contributors to this volume aren’t shy about discussing technical issues. Chief amongst their considerations, I found throughout my reading, is a concern with editing—arguably the most esoteric and least openly-discussed topic in visual research. Rather than a happenstance process, something to delegate to technical experts, or something to be epistemologically suspicious of, editing is a quintessential component of creative-analytic video research practice and is, as Garrett and Hawkins put it in no uncertain terms, “a mode of analysis”...:
... combining the aesthetic and informational in a suite of digital-material processes that are as much about research and analysis as they are oriented toward the production of outputs. Editing is of course a question of audiencing. Considerations of audiencing require that we foreground the productive force of films on the multiple audiences of the work, from the filmmaker as first field-based viewer, to myriad “secondary” audiences who encounter the film as it circulates.

Editing, therefore, is a political and ethical practice within all video-based research no matter what the intended audience. It is a highly technical activity requiring an equally high level of reflexivity that allows us to come to terms with the symbolic, aesthetic, affective, and educational potential of our productions, as well as the possible mobilizations of our work by others with different goals than our own (see Garrett and Hawkins, this volume).

Making conscious technological choices in both the production and post-production phases is an aesthetic as much as it is a political process focused on constructing knowledge “driven by the practical and aesthetic challenges of the task at hand” (Garrett and Hawkins, this volume). Whether it is in the choice of a mode of data collection, a genre and style of editing, or a channel of dissemination, the practice of video research reminds us that doing research is not like following a cookbook recipe but rather a creative and often highly subjective and personal experience woven together by intersecting choices focused on “thematic excavation, the concentration of concepts, the intensification of ideas, and the refinement of trajectories” (Garrett and Hawkins, this volume)—all activities highly dependent on a level of intimacy with one’s subject matter and trade that can only be gained over time as the result of failures, revelations, and reflexive choices.

All of these arguments may seem so common sense to professional video-makers to appear useless, but we must remember that at least within the tradition of ethnographic film aesthetic considerations and a preoccupation with recording and editing technology have long been considered to go against the plain style of observational film—the historically dominant genre. Thus for Heider (1976)—whose text on
anthropological film-making has for years constituted the canon of the field—any aesthetically-sensitive intervention on the part of the film-maker/researcher throughout the editing process runs the risk of manipulating and distorting reality for expressive ends. Ruby (2000, p. 178) summarizes this position thus: “There is an editing style that logically fits [the static camera style] to cinematography and is assumed to safeguard the scientific authority of the footage. If one does almost no editing except to slice rolls of film together in chronological order, then there is apparently little danger of introducing further distortion.” It is precisely in juxtaposition to this plain style canon that the technological skills and choices—whether these be in the production or post-production phase of one’s video work—advocated by the contributors to this volume can be understood as more-than-representational and thus ground-breaking.

The sensuousness of multimodality

Video-based methods of data collection and dissemination can be said to “multi-modal” and therefore superior—insofar as richness of modality goes—to the unimodal nature of writing. The evocation of multiple aural and visual impressions is a communicative achievement made possible by the technological affordance of video as a pictorial and sonorous medium. Video has the key advantage of relaying, for example, complex movements of various kinds—something which both the printed world and photography have difficulty with—and can therefore be part of a more choreographic, vibrant, and intense animation of the human and more-than-human experience. It is no accident that many of the contributors to this volume focus on subject matter influenced and inspired by the mobilities turn across the social sciences.

Video methods have developed from insights gleaned from a broader scholarship that over the last two decades has foregrounded corporeal, sensual, and affective matters. The evocation of experiences and practices of the human body—in all their non-representational excesses—is precisely where traditional methods, with their excessive emphasis on the discursive or the causative, have left much to be desired. The multimodality of video methods is then best equipped “in animating the vitality, movement, energies, and fluidities of more-than-human becoming, and coping with ways of being and knowing that take us beyond cognition and beyond the verbal into realms where bodily and multisensory grammars prevail, for which we have little established vocabulary” (Brown and Banks, this volume).
So, whereas writing and still photography run the risk of flattening action and experience (though see Jungnickel in this volume on time-lapse photography), the aesthetic decisions made in the process of taking and editing video footage have the potential to integrate kinetic, musical, rhythmic, pictorial, luminous, textural, and tonal—only to name a few—dimensions of our and other species’ and objects’ existence. This is not to say, of course, that video methods have a greater likelihood to render actual experiences of reality in more faithful ways, but rather to suggest that the complexity of the impressions they convey has a unique semiotic power to affect viewers and listeners through their relationship with a screen and its speakers. Screens, as Kullman, and Hatzius and Wakeford argues in their respective chapters, and sound speakers, as Gallagher would remind us, direct our attention to the material embeddedness and situatedness of audio-visual practice, opening a multimodal platform for the exploration of encounters with the lifeworld, “while at the same time recognising that, in a world undergoing constant change, everything does not unproblematically lend itself to re-presentation” (Kullman, this volume). Screens and speakers animate imagery and sound, functioning as a “portable sensorium” (Marks 2000, p. 243) that not only carries images containing pre-coded meanings in need of interpretation but “blocs of sensation”, that is, composites of “affects” and “percepts”, or different types of pre-personal energies, intensities and rhythms, that have the potential to set bodies in new kinds of motion as images circulate from one screen to another (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 164). Screens are therefore arenas of intensive engagement that often invite unexpected responses in the bodies that they bring together for making and viewing of images (Kullman, this volume).

Given all the above, I read the contributions to this volume to say that video methods are absolutely essential weapons in the research arsenal of sensuous scholars. As performative, narrative, reflexive, impressionist, embodied, and descriptive qualitative research traditions across the social sciences continue to evolve, the sensuous scholarship arising out of video methods has the potential to develop our
understanding of and appreciation of knowledge *about the senses, through the senses, and for the senses.*

Video methods’ multimodality can—I believe better than any other methods—allow us to cultivate the meaningfulness of our somatic experience of the world, the performance of the skilful activities through which we actively make and remake the world through our body and senses, and the aesthetic evocativeness of our strategies of knowledge generation. The challenge of sensuous scholarship, according to its foremost proponent, Paul Stoller (1997), has traditionally consisted in re-learning how to rediscover the deep significance of sensations and in conveying the more-than-human nature of those sensations in evocative, passionate, carnal, and imaginative ways. As Stoller (1997, pp. xi-xii) writes:

> stiffened from long sleep in the background of scholarly life, the scholar’s body yearns to exercise its muscles. Sleepy from long inactivity, it aches to restore its sensibilities. Adrift in a sea of half-lives, it wants to breathe in the pungent odors of social life, to run its palms over the jagged surface of social reality, to hear the wondrous symphonies of social experience, to see the sensuous shapes and colors that fill windows of consciousness. It wants to awaken the imagination and bring scholarship back to “the things themselves.”

More vibrantly than any other alternative then, video methods—as this book has made clear—serve as a brilliant set of exercises for our stiff bodies and our dull hearts. It is simply up to us to awake and take them on.

**Conclusion: Lingering Limits and Still-Utapped Possibilities**

I wish to conclude this chapter with a few brief practical considerations about video distribution—in my mind a topic not sufficiently treated by this book’s contributors—and with an invitation to disseminate our work more ambitiously. Much too often, it seems to me, the production of video is still viewed as the end point of our work. Few academics indeed worry about little more than making a video “accessible” (by uploading it for example on their own website, or YouTube, or Vimeo)—hence failing to truly actualize the potential of their research. It is true that not all video-based research studies are meant for broad viewing
consumption, but those that are still suffer from a confusion between accessibility and publicity. Simply uploading a video on the web guarantees nothing; most of the academic videos I have managed to find and watch over the last few years have less than 200 viewers. Few have more than 500. Anything above 1,000 or 2,000 is a success. But while 2,000 views are still probably more than a typical journal article garners, the thought of having one tenth or one hundredth the viewership size of a well-edited YouTube video about kittens or puppies is nothing to be proud of. The true strongest lingering limitation of video-based research is that it hasn’t quite found a sizeable audience yet.

As academics we must consider far-reaching video dissemination a quintessential component of our scholarship, of our universities’ broader mission in their communities, and an expression of our social and cultural role as public intellectuals. There are several ways to do this (for a review see Vannini, 2012). We can strategically leverage the power of social media, for example (without facile hopes that somehow our work will magically go “viral” overnight, however). We can more intelligently and more frequently utilize electronic journals and the websites of print journals to link open-access video content with peer-reviewed material. We can do the same for book series as well, of course. We can also seek audiences for our video productions at local, regional, or national and international festivals. We can liaise with local communities, organizations, and interest-based groups. We can make concrete efforts to have our video productions played—even if only in small segments—on local and national TV. And, more ambitiously, we can seek the assistance of professional distributors who can release our work on channels like Netflix and iTunes on independent movie theaters.

All of these strategies require effort, skill, and in most cases intensive collaborations with professional specialists who know how to actualize the potential of video better than most of us academics do. For much too long the prevailing attitudes amongst scholars has been to legitimize our invisibility in public discourse by sanctimoniously invoking our refined taste and by belittling the polluting commercial formats and exigencies of popular channels. Such course of action has guaranteed us nothing but

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See for example my own Routledge series on Innovative Ethnographies, which hopefully represents a step in that direction: [http://innovativeethnographies.net/](http://innovativeethnographies.net/)
irrelevance. Now that more and more of us have learned to operate video cameras and editing suites in their full functionality and with a refreshed imagination, we truly can no longer afford to be so cavalier about the value of playing back our work.

**References**


