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Being there/seeing there

Recording and analysing everyday life in the car

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Being there/seeing there: Recording and analysing everyday life in the car

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There will be two mobilities at work in this chapter, the first being the mobility of the research subjects and the second being the mobility of the video data they produced. There will only be the space to touch on the topic of mobility given our orientation is to methods for its analysis. However, studying mobile cultures raises wider questions about how to engage with and respond to video as a form of data in the social sciences. These are questions about observation, authorship and confidence.

The project which utilised the methodology described in this chapter was part of a thirty month study of social interaction inside cars¹. From fifteen vehicles, approximately two hundred and forty hours of footage were gathered of commuters, car sharers, families and friends travelling. What I would like to do is, rather than moving on to provide a digest of the current literature is take us immediately to the mobile research site and a group of research subjects setting up the camcorders inside their car.

14 Famous Moonie

A group of hill-runners who car share. They are about to return home after a hill-run. Driver is pushing camcorders into place on dashboard. E is the driver, FP front passenger and RP is the rear passenger.



¹ For further details of this ESRC visit the project website, search via 'Habitable Cars' (URLs are likely to be updated regularly).

FP: ...Simon!

((others laughing))

FP: That's it, I'm in now

RP: I hope they're not filming you

((laughter))

E: Naked men in the back

FP: ((turning round to rear)) Can you imagine though if you forgot



it was on and you, you were on the job and then ((returns to looking toward front)) Can you imagine them at university ((returns to rear look)) 'Bout doin it. Come on ((slaps thigh)) let's do it Elsa for a laugh ((looks across at Elsa)).



((returns to looking at rear)) Can you imagine them all sitting there taking notes and discussing it. 'What they, what they doin now?' ((pulls on seatbelt))

((laughing FP and RP))

E: ((Scratching midgebites on side of head)) Yeah you're supposed to forget the cameras are there, just

FP: ((laughing louder)) What if ((stops talking and grabs nose))

E: Yeah it's not often we have guys changing in the backseat

FP: Oh Christ! Is it on just now?

E: No ((reassuringly))

FP: Why's the red light on?

((FP laughs, E looks across, FP looks around))

RP1: Oh Christ! ((FP looks back at him))

((covers rear view of RP's groin))



E: I've got to get a girl in there in the back as well. Sarah might want a lift. Well, Sarah want a lift to the pub ((rear passenger turning around to moonie camera))

FP: And [where's Sean] going?'

RP: [David]

E: Oh Sean's [going] for another run



RP: [David]

FP: Has he ((catches sight of moonie)) Ha! ((recoils)) Paul!

RP: ((moves back to seat))

FP: Jesus Christ Man!



((laughing))

FP: Christ all bloody mighty!

RP: Apologies Hayden², couldn't resist ((laughter))

FP: Prob, probably won't be Hayden that sees it.

((laughter))

² Hayden Lorimer is one of the co-investigators on the project.

What indeed did we, earnest scholars, ‘taking notes and discussing it’ make of all this. As the passenger imagines us, academics, asking ‘What are they doing now?’ In responding to the original video footage and to this transcript I find the tidy dichotomies of methodological planning and moral reflection knocked sideways. Also, as is so often the case, I find myself enjoying the records left of the lives of others. Others who are as concerned with their enjoyment and future enjoyment of the record. With a smile settling our face after being moonied by those we would seek to study and a distinctly social scientific blend of humbleness and arrogance in the face of their resistance to easy explanations we can now begin to ask ourselves ‘what are they doing now?’

Having located the methodology as much in the hands of the unruly and ruly occupants of a car, as in the research team usually assumed to implementing it, we can now move to more familiar ground and consider some of the displacements and re-arrangements of ethnographic knowledge that come with the use of video. Clifford Geertz has argued quite persuasively that we are willing to take seriously the ethnographer’s knowledge of other cultures because they have, for a while, become part of another form of life, that they have, in short, “been there” (Geertz, 1988: 4). We accept what the ethnographer has to say about witchcraft amongst the Azande, reliability in the NHS or inspection routines in UK residential high rises because they are an informed and transformed observer on what has happened and continues to happen in these elsewherees. Ethnographers gather, garner and frequently stumble over knowledge of other cultures through their *presence*. My question is: what happens when the ethnographer brings back video records from *there* to *here* and in doing so shifts some of the burden and responsibility of witnessing to a new audience over here?

Just over a decade ago ethnographers first began to tease out the peculiarities of studying mobile cultures and cultures of mobility (Clifford, 1997; Marcus, 1995). These are cases where our presence ‘there’ is located as a troublesome matter from the outset. One common solution to learning about various mobile practices has been a number of different modes of travelling *with*, be they walking with munro-baggers or reindeer herders (Lorimer, 2002, 2005, 2007) or riding along with snow ploughs (Weilenmann, 2003) or sitting beside bus drivers (Normark, 2006) or cycling with bikers (Spinney, 2006) or sitting with other rail passengers (Watts, forthcoming). In the Habitable Cars project our similarly simple solution was to cadge a lift in our study-vehicles on a number of their typical journeys. For each of our study vehicles myself, or one of the other project members, travelled with them for a week or so, becoming passenger-seat ethnographers. A favourite saying amongst ethnographers (Fielding, 1994; Rouncefield, 2002) is the Native American credo that “one should never criticise a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.” For the cars project this became “one should never criticise a car owner until you have sat for a week in her passenger seat.”

We had a notional two-part ‘follow and film fortnight’, that usually ended up stretching over a month. The second part, that followed on from the passenger-seat ethnography week, was the ethnographer handing a camcorder kit containing two camcorders with their related lenses, cables, batteries and tapes and two foam cubes (visible in the first still of the transcript) over to the project participants. After talking over with the travellers how each camcorder worked, how to fit the fish-eye lenses, change and charge the batteries, we would look around the interior working out where the camcorders

could be positioned in the car. Finally, when the car was ready to go, we would say things like:

Hayden Naturally

Hayden (project member and hill-runner) has installed the pair of camcorders into Elsa's, the driver, car for a first attempt at filming their journey. RP1 & 2 are the rear passengers and FP, the front.

H: On



E: Smile now ((looks back to rear passengers))

RP2: Little red light's [on]

E: +
[yeah]

RP2: So I expect [so]

H: +
[can you see a red light]

Several: Ye[ah]

H: +
[yup] Okay well let's hope ((withdrawing from camcorder))
that's on and this'll be a little test run on the way out

RP1: Okay

H: Uhm, [fingers crossed]
 +
 E: [okay] See you [there then]
 +
 RP2: [okay]

H: Naturally-occurring social activity that's what we're looking for

E: Naturally-occurring

H: ((laughs heartily))

RP2: (he's) been doing [that while]
 +
 RP1: [There's] been snogging in the back

H: ((laughing heartily at that))

RP2: Oh yeah

H: So what way you going then Elsa, out the back? ((points))

E: That way. The cut-off. Yeah

E: ((looking to camcorder)) Watch that doesn't fall.

((chat in rear))

RP2: Derek your job is to hold that thing in place

FP: (2.0) ((looking at camcorder than to rear)) And what about the camera

((wheeze-laugh))

RP2: Right

((driver turning car around, passengers following her manoeuvres))

Along with Hayden's mildly ironic reminder to the occupants of the car that the project wants 'naturally occurring social activity' the most heavily used instruction from us, because of its less obscure nature, was that we wanted 'typical journeys'. We emphasized to our driver and passengers that there was no need to entertain us in the style of docu-soaps or reality television shows. Alongside our verbal requests for mundane, humdrum journeys, we gave the participants FAQ sheets, going over once again our desire to have them do what they ordinarily do.

From the set-up of the camcorders and from seeing the first and second clips it should be apparent that how we went about recording life in the cars was anything but covert. It was, as Lomax and Casey (Lomax, 1998) para 4.1, put it: “a product of the occasioned activities of the researchers and participants.” Rather than seeing the presence of the camcorders as contaminating the video record of mobile practices we exploited them, as Lomax and Casey went on to argue, as “a resource for exploring the interactional production of those activities.” That said, the unattended camera’s presence is quite a bit less distracting and disruptive than having a chin-rubbing character with a notebook busily scribbling in the passenger seat. The ‘there-ness’ of the ethnographer is re-distributed because it has been, in a Latourian (Latour, 1992) sense, delegated to a mute machine, a dumb digital device. Using the camcorder we can be present to catch whatever is happening while not making an overly disruptive difference in what is happening.

Even with the awareness that the video record is a product of the ethnographer and their participants, and, even when you are not seeking to justify its claims to knowledge, at the point that the research team, or any other researchers, sat down to watch the recordings there was, and is, still a tremendous temptation to slip into an *observational* mode. When we scrutinise video footage of mobile practices and when we talk about its strengths as empirical material, at that time we risk becoming the disengaged and detached neutral observer that positivist inquiries required. In watching the video-recording, we do not prompt the practices, it seems that there is only a steady flow of information *from* the footage *to* the researcher. No information is passed back from ethnographer to participant once this form of self-filming is underway. How could it be? The events are in the past. The ethnographers are not even in the car and thus have become an observer so withdrawn that they become an ‘absent presence’ (Raffel, 1979). Once the events that occur during any car journey have been taped, in reviewing the tapes the project members cannot intervene or in other ways change what happens in them. The video footage seems to return the participants’ local organisational practices to their source.

In this observational mode we contemplate the re-use of video footage, the sharing of stable standardised data, without the need or requirement that we understand what its maker was up to. In sorting through the video footage we could isolate events made by the maker from those made by the culture being recorded. Exercising the latter sort of criterion I have selected out these first two clips. The remainder once such a removal has been carried out should leave clips that could be analysed without reference to this specific project’s project. By enrolling the car travellers into the recording process we seem to transfer accountability for the recording. ‘The responsible observer is one who can make what he observes responsible for what he records’ (Raffel, 1979) p29. It would appear that thereby we escape Geertz’s attribution of responsibility to the author because the subjects are becoming the authors of their own footage.

Such are the temptations of the relationship between an observational mode and the video record. What of the event and the video record? Here the camcorder appears to offer the possibility of an absent-presence at an event, while equally events are apparently disclosing themselves to the camcorder without any need for the ethnographer to do anything. What Geertz’s (1988) work was constantly reminding us of, was that ethnographers were authors, that each one had different styles for securing their authority. The camcorder, then, seems to promise that idiosyncrasies of note-

taking, documentation and diary-keeping might disappear to be replaced by the impassive standardised recording of the digital camcorder. Events disclose themselves to the camcorder, they are not summoned or directed along the way by the ethnographer's presence.

2.

Let's change tack. Reading Harvey Sacks's lectures (1992) not long after I completed my PhD I felt a sense of revelation at a quite distinct sense of intellectual ambition and analytic craft³. Here it seemed were discoveries and solutions in the face of seemingly intractable problems from social and cultural theory. Sacks's lectures were rich in findings. He would analyse a single transcript and show how particularities began to unpick generalities developed through the emaciated examples of social ordering worked on by theorists such as Talcott Parsons. Examining, famously, turn-taking mechanisms (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), along with categorisation practices, pauses, grammar, concepts of mind, speaker-selection techniques, enforcements of order, the accomplishment of ordinariness (Sacks, 1984), laughter (Sacks, 1978) and the list goes on and on, Sacks lectures are an embarrassment of riches. After reading them you notice all manner of missed ordinary accomplishments afresh.

Excited by the promise of audio-recordings and their pain-staking transcription, Sacks's desire was to found a truly scientific science of human behaviour in the form of conversation analysis (Lynch, 1993). Mike Lynch reminds us that, as his work developed and departed from its ethnomethodological origins, Sacks profitably took up a mistaken version of what scientific method is, in order to place his studies on a firmer foundation. Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology is infamous for its constant excavation and explosive demolition of social science foundations of various sorts. Sacks accepted that a key element in the establishment of scientific findings was a technology of observation, data, replication of findings and professionalized analysis. The ubiquity of the phenomena, speaking, and the tape recorder and the transcript would allow the creation of stable data, checking and replication of results.

To echo Lynch's remarks Harvey Sacks's studies of language had a preceding, and then accompanying, "natural philosophical" shape (Lynch, 1993: 216). In his early lectures he challenged the existing social science studies of language in a manner similar to that of J L Austin's criticisms of philosophy (Cavell, 2002). For Sacks the tape-record was the place to begin and to, in an ethnomethodological vein, re-specify various classical topics in social science methods such as observation, description, models and explanations. For those who have taken up Sack's legacy, like myself, recordings of various things happening, are at hand to be returned to again and again (and again (and again)). The care exhibited in this return is one that we usually find in literary scholars who return again and again to canonical works such as the plays of Shakespeare or, equally, the film *Alien* (Kuhn, 1990; Mulhall, 2002).

To bring this back to the day-to-day work of the Habitable Cars Project, the twenty vehicles recruited for the project generated over one hundred hours of video which we

³ Reading Cavell's reflections on his encounter with JI Austin has greatly helped me in understanding the experience of encountering Sacks if one has had a background in social and cultural theory (Cavell, 1994, 2002).

archived into six hundred and sixty indexed clips. In editing out the six hundred and sixty clips I was pursuing once again ‘typicality’, identifying general features, conventions and, equally, exceptional events. Much like the manner in which the process of transcription has long been recognised as the beginnings of theorising conversation, so it is that the editing out of events from the long run of a journey is part and parcel of the project’s inquiries. In effect, more than three quarters of the footage disappears at this stage, edited away to the virtual cutting room floor. That the larger part of the original data, be it questionnaire sheets or audio-recordings of interviews, disappears is surely not a surprise to those pursuing substantial research projects. What can compound this disappearance in quantity is the loss of time as researchers become engulfed by the requirements of indexing and coding their data-sets. The danger of trying to put on show every event and action that the project recorded is that we become bureaucrats of data-sets rather than analysts of social practices. As a consequence of this desire we have a changed set of evidential objects and criteria to the example and the illustration; we have instead the fragment, the specimen, the actual and the typical.

You have seen two fragments already neither of which was analysed at any great length because they were there to form a dialogue from the participants with our concerns as social scientists. What we will move on to now, briefly, is how the analysis proceeds of the following fragment:



*P= passenger, D= driver*⁴

((Approaching slip road))

((P raises his hand to point at car pulling out))

P: *(inaudible)*

((His finger then touches nose))

⁴ Denoting these person as these particular categories of actor (e.g. ‘passenger’) already begins to make assumptions about the relevant categories, where the fact that they are a passenger (or a man or a commuter) may or may not be relevant. I can only signal such concerns here, for a fuller examination of omni-presence or not of categories (H. Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007).

P: I thought he was gonna::, *((looks into car as they pass it))* aye, she was gonnae pull out and go for it

P: Somebody pulled out in front of me
+
((turns toward driver))

(1.0)

D: *((turns toward passenger))*

P: Comin' in

((both return to looking forwards))

(1.0)

P: Just down from your street *((sideways nod))*

(0.5)

P: *((shakes his head))* Didnae even apol'. I beeped at him and everything he didn't bother apologising *((looks toward driver extendedly and with additional move into driver's space))*

P: *((looks away out of passenger window shaking his head and then ahead))*

(3.0)

D: *((moves head slightly toward passenger))* It'll be your fault of course

P: *((looks across))* Mhm?

D: *((looks and meets P's look))* It'll be your fault

((both turn away))

P: It'll be ma fault yeah *((both smiling))* Oh yeah *((looks out passenger window))*

This was one of the first clips we worked with and in a sense we could have worked on it for the whole 30 months of the project. Conversation analysts have worked on single transcripts for that length of time. What happens in the beginning of the clip caught my attention, as it did the passenger's, for what appears to be a getting-too-close shave. An accident almost happens in the way that accidents quite often almost happen on the roads. At the time I was wanting to respond to the fact that a great deal of driving is studied through accident statistics. Here was a moment that is invisible to those statistics, perhaps initially invisible to the driver, noticed by the passenger and brought to the driver's attention.

Typical of the interest of ethnomethodology we find convergence here between our work as viewers of the video looking for events happening and the passenger's themselves noticing something happening. The passenger is in a risky position in terms of pointing out something they think is happening since they are a passenger and should not be interfering in the driving. However that was not quite the way that our analysis developed as we re-watched and discussed what was happening in it. We become more and more interested in the accountability of the gesture, that its consequence is dealt with by saying 'I thought he was gonnae pull out'. In trying to engage with cognitive studies of driving as an ideal case between thinking and habit, our interest was piqued by the ordinary usage in this clip of 'I thought'. So we find ourselves surprised by where we ended up and how passengers and drivers maintain reason and order on the road and inside the car (Laurier, forthcoming).

Proponents of video (and this is not just CA) are excited by the opportunity to show and share clips such as the one transcribed above. The consultation of the original recording appears to provide for other researchers to re-check the analysis or to argue with the descriptions made by any particular analyst of the events recorded on video. Here is where we return to the observational mode discussed earlier: the presence of the ethnographer as an opinionated observer is lessened by their substitution by other analysts when the video record is shown during a data session. Cross-checking with other researchers will secure the validity of the knowledge gathered from the video material. What we might forget in saying so is that although literary or film studies share a common text they are happy to disagree about any novel, play or feature as much as they agree about it. Their readings of a poem or a novel are embedded in the opinions they wish to venture (Livingston, 1995). Yet what they perhaps display in all of their disagreements is a willingness to return to a work that they are reading together. To keep returning to that work. How often in the social sciences do we find a community of researchers willing to keep returning to an interview transcript or video clip? Perhaps not so much to get to the bottom of it, to say for once and for all what is really means but to? To what? What is the point of looking at a video clip or transcript of some quite ordinary thing?

3.

Clifford Geertz (1988) described Malinowski's style as 'I-witnessing'. Compared to the slightly uneasy travelogue of Levi Straus, Malinowski's is a total immersion in the 'there'. By Malinowski's engulfment we also come to realise there is a lot more to the 'there' than one would expect from other forms of ethnography where the identity of the ethnographer is never in danger of being drowned out by their immersion in another culture. Geertz argued that what we have in Malinowski's work is the comprehension of the self by the detour of the other. To secure its claims to knowledge, the 'I' of the ethnographer carries ever more weight, since the experience of the encounter offers up self-knowledge as much as knowledge of another culture, and so the 'I' must become ever more convincing. As Geertz puts it, 'Erasing distance between observer and observed ... soaking it up and writing it down' p83. In the project

our aim was not however to push the car travellers into serving as an exotic other. They are, quite ordinary, familiar others.

What then is happening in the car project when its three researchers spend a great deal of time viewing video clips of typical practice? The site of immersion in the practices of others is displaced and the desire to be the stranger to those others or to become a stranger to one's self disappears. As Cavell puts it briefly, the video clips become a way of responding to the 'appeal of the ordinary' (Cavell, 1990: 66). Or to adapt his words to a more ethnomethodological spirit, between for instance, social science's sceptical attitude toward human action and the grammars of ordinary practice. In attending to video recordings, the distance of a sceptical social *science* found in the gap between observer and observed is posed in a different configuration and our intimacy in sharing in human practice and the implications of doing so are transfigured.

How I describe my video viewing methods to students are in terms, borrowed again from Harvey Sacks, of a style of 'unmotivated listening and looking'. I say so, in order to try and shake them free from the routine habit of applying one or another theory from the social sciences to what they are watching and listening to. Unmotivated viewing is a term not so unlike and, moreover, developed from two eminent predecessors: ethnomethodological indifference and phenomenological intactness. Its trouble is that it does still sound too much like the uncaring, uninvolved observer and uncommitted observer of the other that a certain form of positivist observation wants. And in writing this paper my realisation is that I will have to stop offering 'unmotivated watching' as a method for analysis. However, what we are asking of ourselves is not, in the end, total immersion either. As if we might lose ourselves in what we are watching totally. Rather it is the *patience* of conversation analysis with ordinary practice that I find myself valuing.

Patience is necessary because footage, at the outset, is of an unremarkable and barely noticeable part of everyday life. Often the Habitable Cars project investigators would sit for an hour with a video clip just getting nowhere, stumbling around amongst dead ends, saying something we have said too many times before or wanting to jump to a line from a theorist we have been reading. When, and if, we were patient with a clip, something would emerge. What I have learnt from this is that we have to try and be confident with the mundane aspects of mobility. Confident, because what seems to be in danger is that we lose our confidence in ordinary practice to say anything back to grander theories of human affairs. We have to begin 'in the street, or in doorways' (Cavell, 1994: 57) or, as here, in the car where analysis of these ordinary practices will waken us to wonder. Using video will not allow us to ground our theories or anyone else's, despite Glaser and Strauss's famous promise that we could ground theory through empirical work. The promise of this sort of empirically guided study is that it may help give us a brief rest from theorising mobility.

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