



Ethnographic Filmmaking

Abodid Sahoo



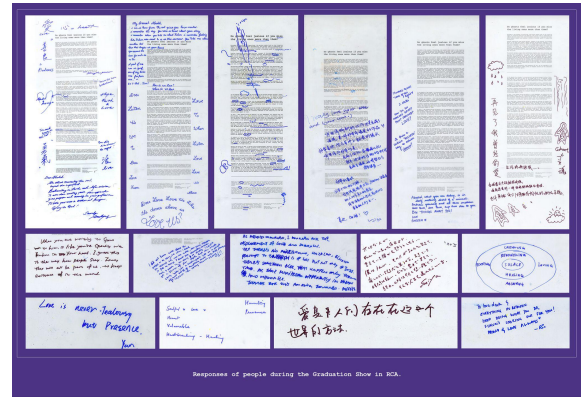
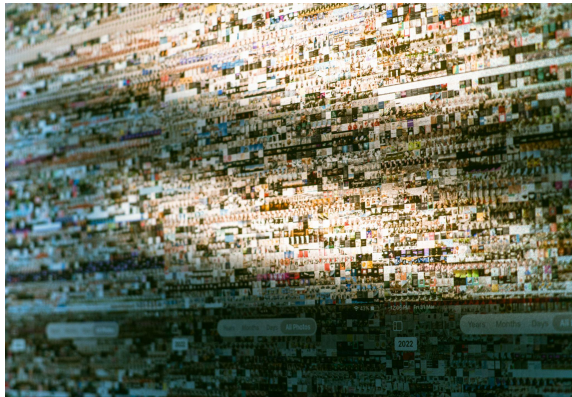
Alumni, Royal College of Art, London (Apple Scholar)

Filmmaking • Photography • Cultural Research

BSA 2026 Presenter | Cambridge Cultural Heritage Data School Fellow

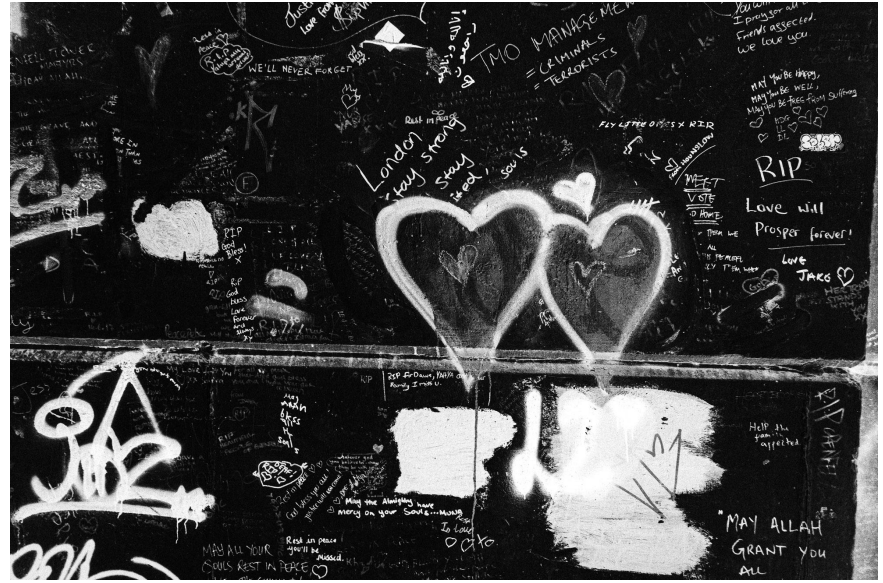
www.abodid.com

















Agnes Varda


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n37iq8cCDH0>

Agnès Varda (1928–2019) was a pioneering French filmmaker who bridged the gap between fiction, documentary, and art installation, often adopting an ethnographic eye to observe everyday life.

Activity time

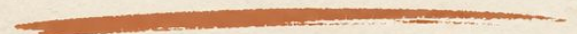
LETS GOOOO!





WORD CLOUD WARM-UP

In one word, what does
a camera mean to you?





WORD CLOUD WARM-UP

“In one word, what does
a camera mean to you?”

**Please scan
the keyword code
to share
your answer**

Use your phone camera. Type one word only.

Understanding Different Types of Cameras

How each type shapes the way we see



1

Still camera

One frozen moment

composition • detail • memory



2

Moving camera

A sequence over time

movement • rhythm • sound



3

Digital camera

Image as digital data

review • edit • share



4

Analog camera

Image on film or tape

slower • tactile • delayed



Book

Chapters

Paragraphs

Sentences



Movie

Sequences

Scenes

Shots

4K

REC



00:00:03:17

68% 



Scene



Opening Sequence

Share a purpose:

Shot

A single, continuous recording from when the camera starts to when it stops

Scene

A series of shots set in the same time and place.

Sequence

combines related scenes to build a larger narrative moment.

Shot



Scene



Sequence



Activity time

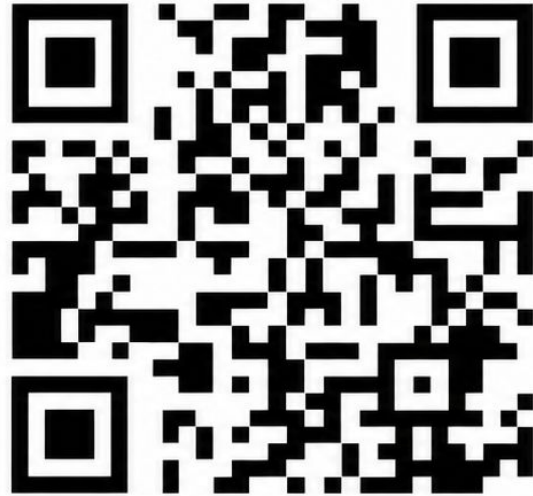
LETS GOOOO!



**If your phone gallery
became a documentary,
what would its title be?**



Scan to share your answer

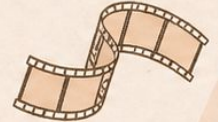


Presentation Link:
<https://admin.sli.do/event/9DDyj1a3u1XEpi9pzgKgsz/polls>

Slido Link:
<https://app.sli.do/event/9DDyj1a3u1XEpi9pzgKgsz>

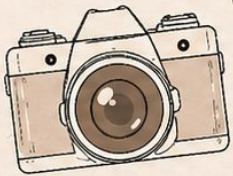
1. Open your phone camera
2. Point it at the QR code
3. Tap the link that appears
4. Type your answer and submit

If the code doesn't scan, move a little closer or farther away and try again.



WHO HOLDS THE CAMERA

remains a powerful question in visual culture,
especially when it unsettles long-standing
hierarchies of representation.



Source:
<https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/labour-crisis-and-resilience-of-women-fishing-communities-tamil-nadu-odisha>



Same Subject, Different Angles



Camera position changes emotion and power.

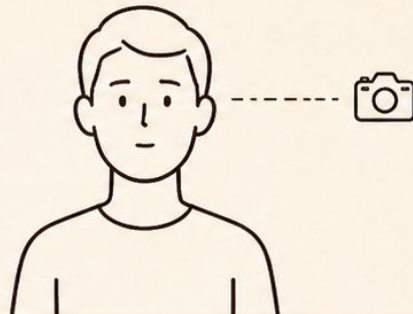
High angle

vulnerable



Eye-level

equal



Low angle

powerful



Dutch tilt

uneasy



Same Subject, Different Lighting

Light changes mood, emotion and meaning.

Soft front light

— • —
calm



Side light

— • —
mysterious



Harsh top light

— • —
tense



Backlight

— • —
isolated



Activity time

LETS GOOOO!

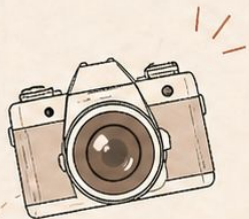


Take out your phone.

Without taking a photo yet, look at the camera app and answer:
what does this camera allow you to do?



**Which of these features
gives you more control
over the subject?**



Filmmaking Techniques & Their Impact



Zoom

Allows you to look from a distance.



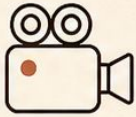
Close-up

Creates intimacy or psychological pressure.



Selfie mode

Makes the filmmaker an active part of the scene.



Video

Captures voice and behaviour, not just appearance.



Delete

Allows the filmmaker to decide what survives.



Filter

Changes the mood or "truth" of the image.





Is he super powerful just coz he has a big cam?

Best Practices for Storing Your Data

01 BACK UP REGULARLY



Keep multiple copies of your files. Use external drives or cloud storage.

02 ORGANIZE YOUR FILES



Use clear folder structures and consistent file names.

03 USE RELIABLE STORAGE



Use quality drives and trusted cloud services. Avoid unknown or cheap devices.

04 KEEP YOUR DATA SAFE



Protect your files with strong passwords and encryption when needed.

05 CHECK YOUR FILES



Regularly open your files to make sure they are not corrupted.

06 PLAN FOR THE LONG TERM



Migrate data to new drives when needed and keep track of your backups.



Your data is your story. Store it safely today, so it stays with you tomorrow.

GUIDELINES

FOR MAINTAINING AND CARING FOR YOUR EQUIPMENT.

01 KEEP IT CLEAN



Clean your equipment regularly.
Use appropriate tools and materials.

02 STORE IT PROPERLY



Store in a clean, dry place.
Use a dry box to protect from humidity.

03 HANDLE WITH CARE



Handle your equipment gently.
Avoid drops, knocks and rough use.

04 PROTECT FROM ELEMENTS



Keep equipment away from rain,
sand, dust and extreme temperatures.

05 USE THE RIGHT ACCESSORIES



Use recommended batteries, chargers,
cables and memory cards.

06 CHECK REGULARLY



Inspect your equipment regularly
for any loose parts or damage.

07 KEEP SOFTWARE UPDATED



Keep firmware and software up
to date for better performance.

08 SERVICE WHEN NEEDED



Get your equipment serviced
by authorized professionals.



Good care today, great stories tomorrow.

Your equipment helps you tell stories. Take care of it, and it will take care of you.

FRAMING THE SUBJECT WITH A TRIPOD

STABILITY. RESPECT. AUTHENTICITY.

WHY USE A TRIPOD?



Stable and consistent shots



Less distracting for the subject



Ideal for long takes and observation



Helps you focus on listening, not framing



HOW TO USE EFFECTIVELY



1. Get Consent

Explain your purpose. Ask permission and answer their questions.



2. Place with Care

Position the camera where it won't intrude or dominate. Avoid blocking or hovering.



3. Set and Step Back

Once framed, step back. Engage in conversation and let the moment flow.



4. Be Patient

Let time build comfort. The best moments come when people forget the camera.

ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

- ✓ A stable camera shows respect—it gives space to the subject.
- ✓ It allows you to observe the full context without interruption.
- ✓ Keep the scene intact; avoid cropping out elements that may change the story.



Use a tripod to observe, not to control. Let your presence be calm, not commanding.

See. Listen. Respect. Record.



HANDHELD CAMERA

Movement. Intimacy. Presence.



1) Be with the subject

first-person, close to the action



2) Follow movement

dance, walking, everyday flow



3) Capture chaos

energy, mood, spontaneity



4) Decide on the spot

adapt to place and people



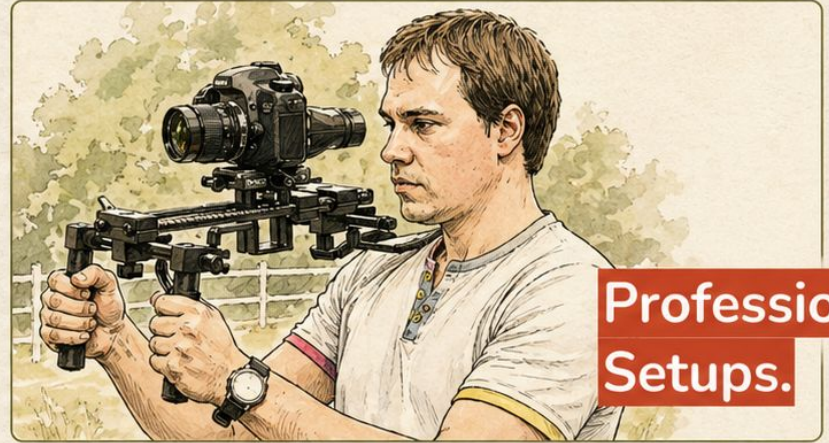
Handheld feels like presence — use it with care, consent, and sensitivity.



Ethnographic perspective: handheld can reveal lived rhythm, but it must never overpower the subject.

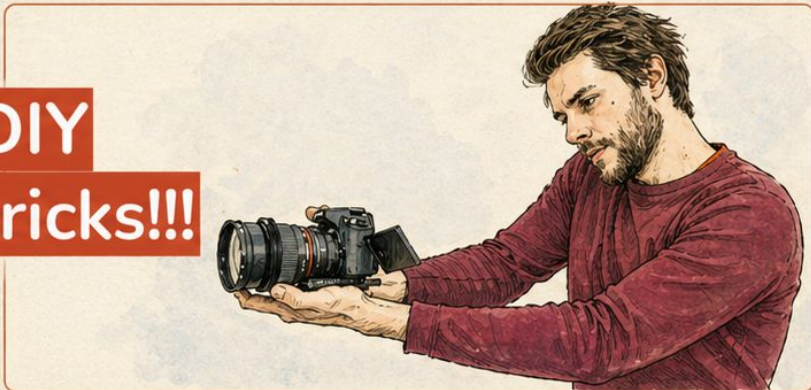
Holding the Camera

How the body becomes part of the shot



Professional
Setups.

DIY
tricks!!!



Tripod vs. Handheld Cameras:

When and How to Use Each Effectively.



TRIPOD

Stability. Intentionality. Observation.



Provides stability and consistency.



Allows for composed, deliberate framing.



Ideal for longer takes and careful observation.

VS.

HANDHELD

Flexibility. Intimacy. Presence.



Offers mobility and quick response.



Creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy.



Reflects lived experience and natural movement.



WHEN TO USE

Effective for:



Wide establishing shots of places and environments



Interviews and conversations



Observing events, ceremonies, or performances



Timelapses and long-duration observations



Recreating context or details with precision

WHEN TO USE

Effective for:



Following people in their daily lives



Capturing candid moments and spontaneous events



Moving in tight or crowded spaces



Emotional and personal moments



Journeys, transitions and in-between spaces



ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

Both tools shape how we relate to people and place.



Tripod – steps back to observe.

Shows patterns, relationships and broader context.



Handheld – steps in to experience.

Reveals details, emotions and the rhythm of everyday life.

Use both with intention.

Let your choice reflect your relationship to the story.



There is no perfect tool—only the right choice for the story you want to tell.

Be thoughtful. Be present. Be respectful.



Mount the Camera. Trust the Setup.

A careful tripod setup lets you focus on listening, interviewing, and observing.

Tripod Mounting Check

- ✓ Check camera + lens weight
- ✓ Tighten the quick-release plate
- ✓ Lock the plate into the head
- ✓ Balance heavy lenses
- ✓ Open legs fully + keep center low
- ✓ Frame, tighten, recheck

LOCK IT. MOVE IT. RECHECK IT.

— Use the tripod smartly. Use it safely. —

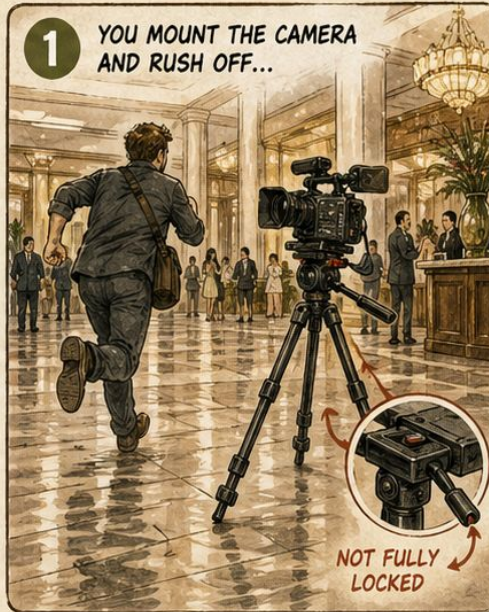


Tripod Accidents Happen Fast

— Most falls begin with one unlocked part. —

✓ SAFETY CHECKLIST

- ✓ Check slippery floors
- ✓ Lock every leg
- ✓ Secure quick-release plate
- ✓ Tighten pan/tilt locks
- ✓ Balance heavy lenses
- ⚠ Use sandbags if needed



LOCK IT. TEST IT. THEN WALK AWAY.

— Stability protects your story — and your camera. —

UNDERSTANDING LIGHT

NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL, AND ITS IMPACT ON FILMMAKING.

PRIORITIZE NATURAL LIGHT

- ✓ Best for authenticity and truth.
- ✓ Observe the light at different times of day.
- ✓ Use windows, open spaces, and shade smartly.
- ✓ Light shapes mood and story—use it with intention.



USE ARTIFICIAL LIGHT MINIMALLY

- ✓ Use only when needed.
- ✓ Keep it soft and subtle.
- ✓ Place lights at a distance—never overpower.
- ✓ Tools: reflector/bounce, RGB tube light, LED panels.
- ✓ Keep it simple and non-intrusive.



CHECK LIGHT WITH YOUR HAND



Hold your palm toward the light.



Rotate slowly to see how light falls and shifts.



This helps you understand contrast on your subject.



Light should support the story, not affect the comfort or change the truth.



Respect the space. Protect the comfort. Let the light serve the story.

Observe. Adapt. Stay invisible.



Framing the Subject



— Where to place the camera — and why —

1 Ask first

Consent creates comfort.



2 Step back


Let the subject breathe.



3 Keep context

Don't crop out meaning.



.....  Frame with care. Observe without overpowering. 



No hidden camera

Who Has the Camera?

Your position changes the story before recording begins.

A camera, English-speaking ability, university identity, expensive equipment, or urban background can create a **power gap**. The person filming may appear more “official” or powerful, even without intending to.



English-speaking ability

Language can create distance and authority.



University identity

Your affiliation may signal status and power.



Expensive equipment

Looks “professional”, creates authority.



Urban background

Lifestyle and exposure can create a divide.



Some may feel comfortable.
Some may hesitate.
Many may stay silent.

Notice. Respect.
Listen. Collaborate.



Be in their shoes.

Build trust. Share power. Create space.



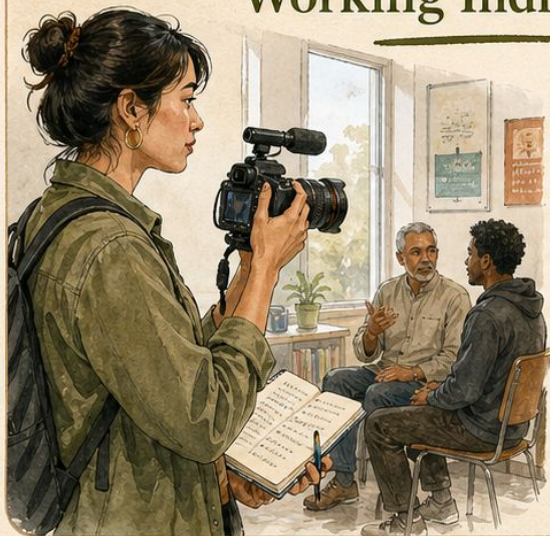
The most ethical shot is the one they are comfortable with.



Individual Voice or Team Lens?

Choose the method that protects the story — and the people in it.

Working Individually



personal perspective



quiet presence



flexible decisions



direct responsibility

Collaborating in a Team



multiple perspectives



shared ethics



technical support



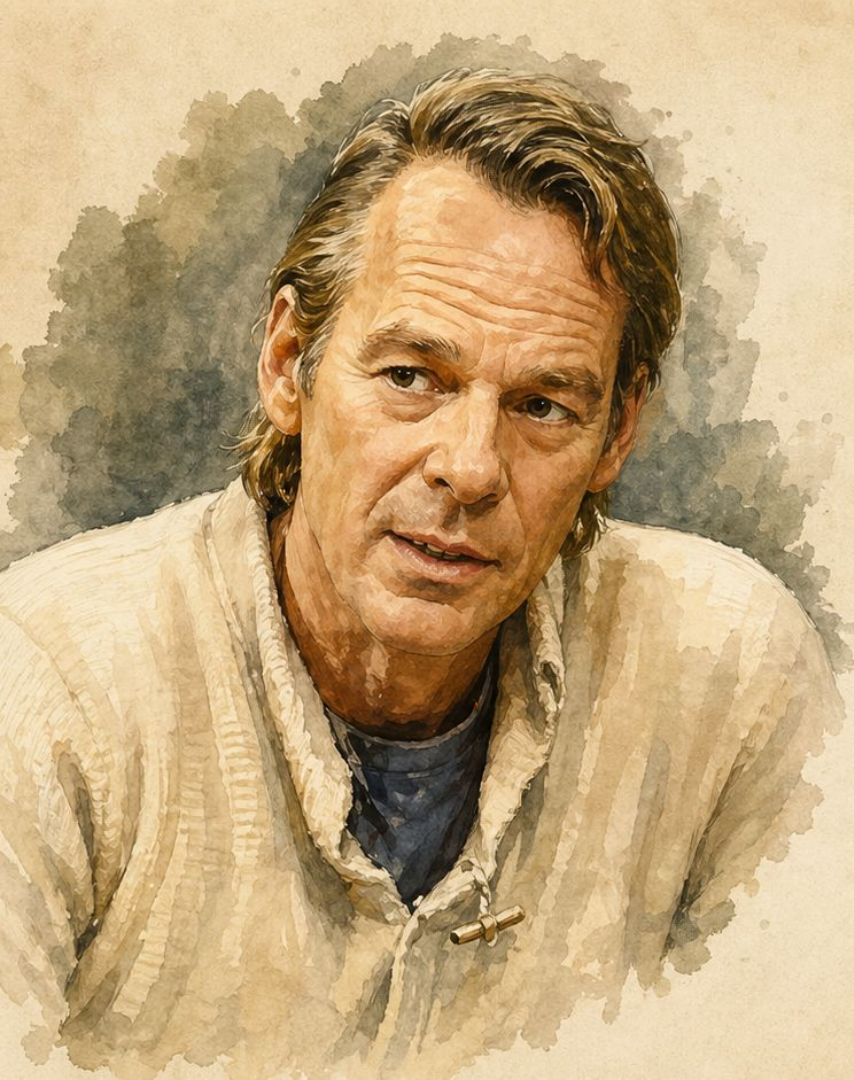
language + gender sensitivity

Work alone with care. Work together with trust.

Let comfort, consent, and context decide your approach.





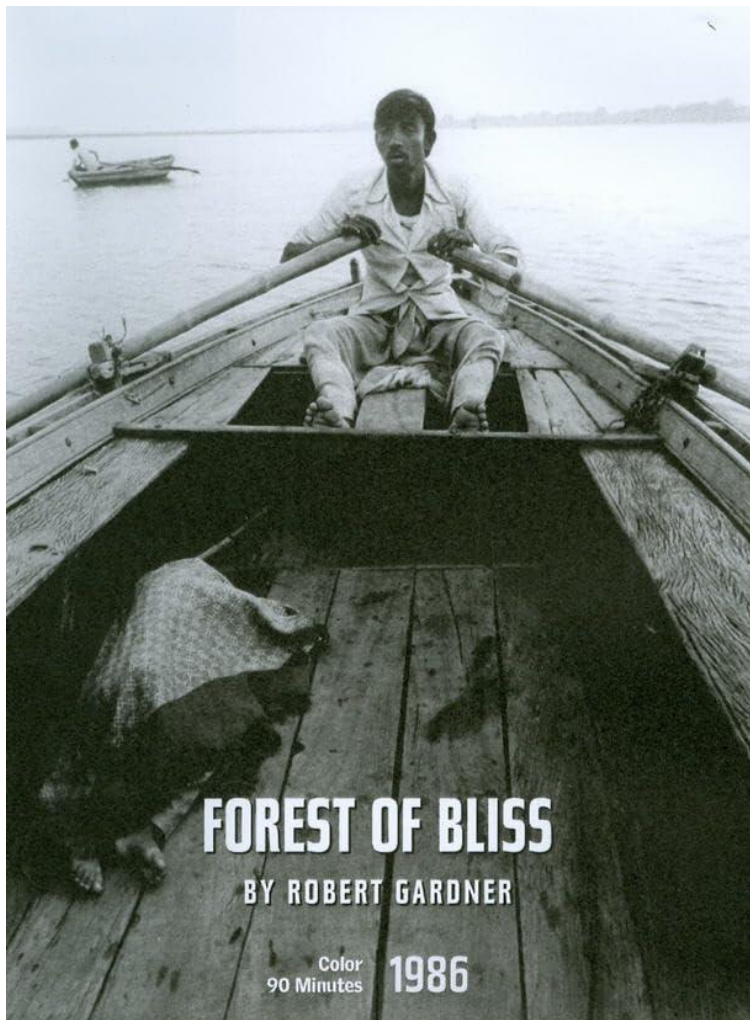


“

It is apparent that only a certain kind of person will want to make ethnographic films, It will, above all, be those who sense the profound affinity that exists between the film medium and a desire to understand people.

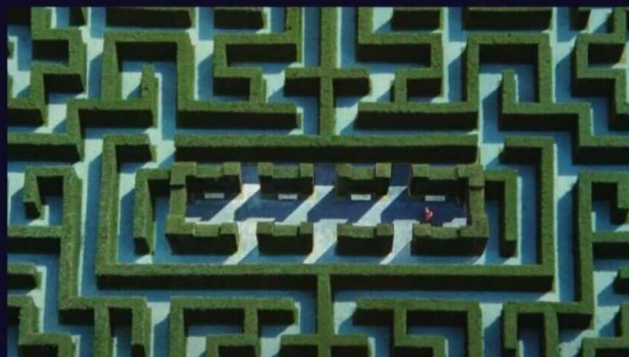
— *Robert Gardner* —

”



A film to watch.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC7JZKprUTM>





Do you really need all this knowledge about framing and color grading in ethnographic filmmaking?

Capturing Clear Dialogue

Bad audio loses the audience.

Clean dialogue keeps the story alive.



Phone Recorder

close, clear, simple



Lavalier Mic

near the voice



Portable Recorder

leave it, sync later



WAV Files

record clean masters

Listen before you shoot.

Steady Shots, No Fancy Gear

Your body and surroundings can become the stabilizer.

1 Human Tripod



Elbows in. Two hands.
Camera close.

2 Ninja Walk



Soft knees. Heel-to-toe.
Float the frame.

3 Strap Tension



Push forward until
the strap is tight.

4 Go Wide

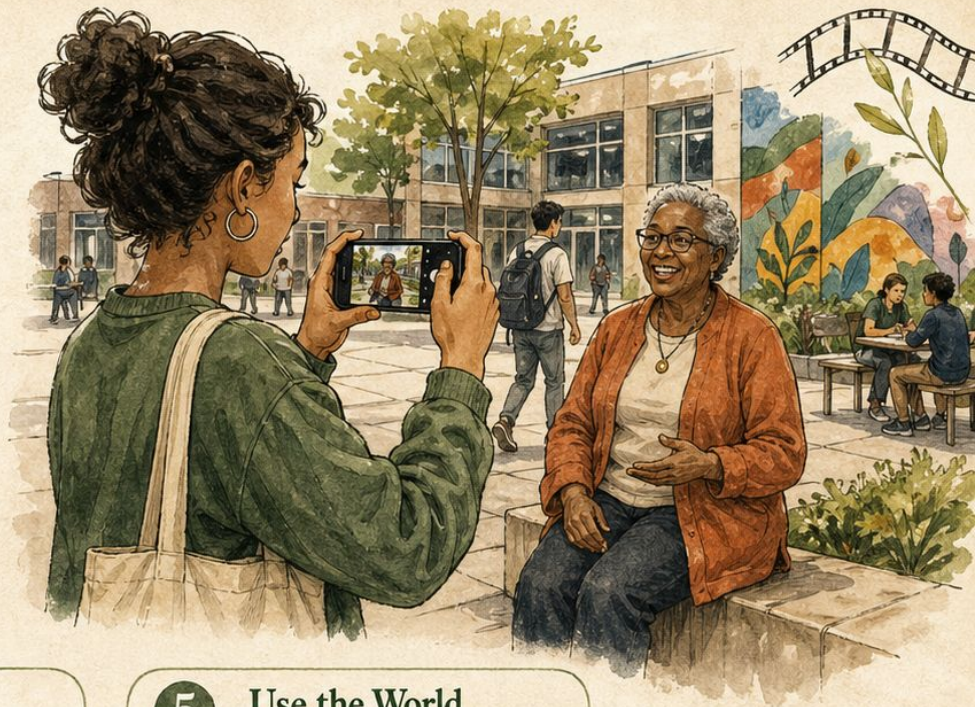


Zoom out. Tiny shakes
become smaller.

5 Use the World



Lean on walls, tables,
fences.



You do not need expensive gear to begin.

Subtitling as Ethical Translation



Preserve the voice

tone · pauses · rhythm



Accuracy is respect

names · places · dialects

A subtitle can protect
a voice — or replace it.

Listen first. Translate second. Represent carefully.



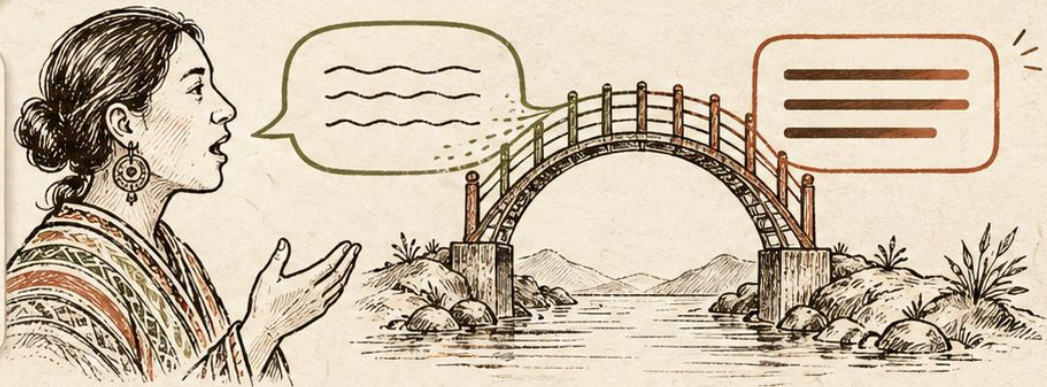
Use tools, review everything

auto-captions are a draft



Carry culture

some words should stay



Do not just translate what was said. Translate what was meant.

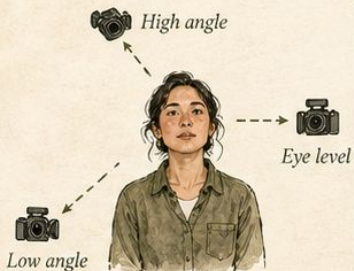
FRAMING HOLDS POWER

Every distance is a decision.

1

Angle

Who feels powerful?



2

Close-up

Ask before intimacy.



3

Wide shot

Let context speak.



4

Depth

Blur isolates.
Focus connects.



Shallow depth



Deep depth

Deep focus = ambience + relationships.



Frame with consent. Choose what the viewer is allowed to know.

Shared Authorship

Film with people, not just about them.

Collaborative Filmmaking Check

- ✓ Explain the purpose clearly
- ✓ Ask consent at every stage
- ✓ Share the camera when possible
- ✓ Let participants shape the story
- ✓ Review what will be shown
- ✓ Ask: how does this help them?



Subjects can become:

co-creators • storytellers • camera holders • data collectors

Consent is not a form. It is an ongoing conversation.

Share power. Share process. Share responsibility.



SPEAKING NEARBY

not speaking about

‘Rather than “speaking about” a culture outside your experience, the filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests we “speak nearby”. In an interview for *Artforum*, Trinh says:

“ When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film... You can only speak nearby, in proximity... which requires that you deliberately suspend meaning... This allows the other person to come in and fill that space as they wish.

— Trinh T. Minh-ha

Leave space for others to enter the frame.

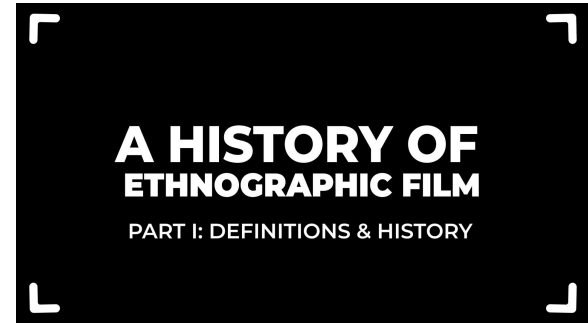
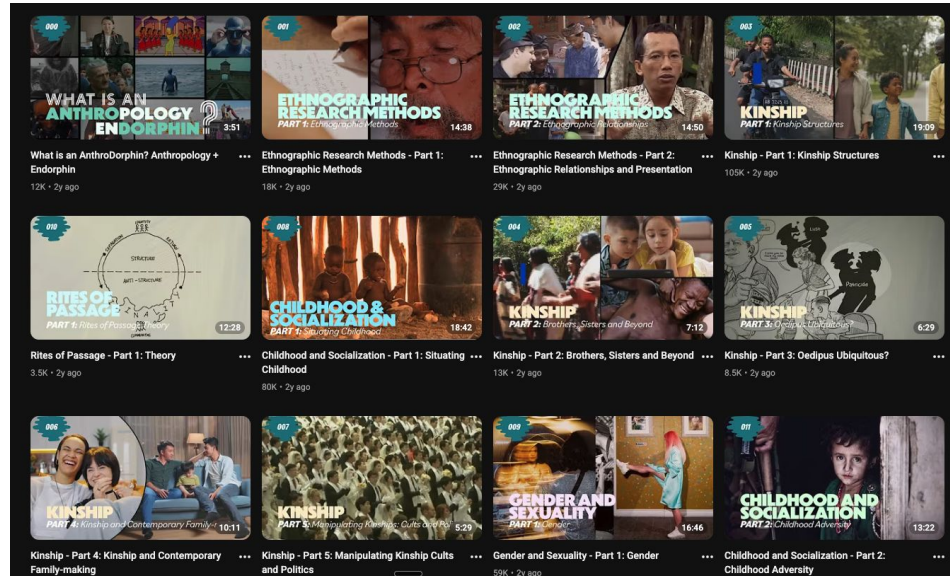
Must Reads.

<https://www.frieze.com/article/there-no-such-thing-documentary-interview-trinh-t-minh-ha>

<https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/labour-crisis-and-resilience-of-women-fishing-communities-tamil-nadu-odisha>

WHO HOLDS THE CAMERA remains a powerful question in visual culture, especially when it unsettles long-standing hierarchies of representation. The acts of photographing and of being photographed are at the centre of debates on authorship and power. For much of modern photojournalism, particularly in South Asia, the “subject” was rendered visible primarily through the gaze of outsiders. In this field, fisherwomen have too often been seen through external lenses—foreign correspondents, aid workers, metropolitan media, NGO professionals. Rarely have they authored their own stories. “The moment they tied their sarees, holding a kattapai (sturdy carry-bag) in one hand and a camera in the other, they began to record their world,” the photojournalist M Palani Kumar said, “creating a body of work that I regard as a vital document.” The women captured long-hidden stories by venturing into spaces, familiar and unfamiliar.

Must Watch.



A HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

PART I: DEFINITIONS & HISTORY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfFxD0n1bU&t=82s>

<https://www.youtube.com/@anthrodorphins>