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Visions of the field: A report from World Anthropology Day 2025

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ABSTRACT: Visual anthropology is gaining increasing attraction, and this year's World Anthropology Day, organised by the Swedish Anthropological Association (SANT), celebrated the subfield with a curated film screening. This article covers the highlights of the event, introduces the featured filmmakers, and includes an extended interview with one of them.

A lively buzz fills the foyer of Bio Roy in the heart of Gothenburg. Guests mingle over popcorn, beer, and coffee before being invited into the beautifully decorated theatre. Laughter and small talk fill the room, followed by the instant reactions to what takes place on the screen. Tears, hands covering mouths in shock, and laughter again. The experience becomes collective. Together we explore medical practices, the complex power dynamics of staging a play, family trauma, grief, and the unexpected story of launching a hamburger joint in South Korea.

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) established World Anthropology Day, traditionally celebrated on the third Thursday of February, to promote the discipline. Inspired by this initiative, the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) launched the European Anthropology Days–an extended celebration aligned with the same time of year. Both efforts reflect a shared commitment to raising public awareness of anthropology and highlighting its relevance in today's world.

At the Swedish Anthropological Association (SANT), we have focused on reaching audiences outside academia to increase public knowledge about anthropology as a subject in Sweden. As it has been a relatively small subject that struggles to reach beyond academia, SANT joins in on the celebrations to make anthropology accessible and visible to a broad audience. In 2022, SANT collaborated with the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm to create a full-day event dedicated to the theme "*Water: Cleansing, Polluted, Ritualised*".[1] In 2024, SANT collaborated with the Museum of Work in Norrköping under the theme *Man and Digital Technologies*.[2] This year, in 2025, SANT aimed to diversify the audience further and organised a short-film one-day festival. The event was well-received, with active participation from students across multiple disciplines, alongside a broader audience of interested attendees.

The screening showcased films by Mark Lindenberg, Gustav Bengtsson, Ignacio

[1] https://www.sverigesantropologforbund.org/arrangemang/varldsantropologidagen_2022

[2] https://www.sverigesantropologforbund.org/nyheter/antropologidagen-2024-arbetets-museum

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Rodríguez, Jami Bennett, and Rachel Runesson. Following the screenings, a moderated discussion took place with filmmakers Gustav Bengtsson and Rachel Runesson, led by Johanna Dahlin, Chair of SANT. The conversation explored the filmmakers' dual positions as both anthropologists and creative practitioners, highlighting the methodological and ethical considerations this dual role entails. Ignacio Rodríguez was also scheduled to participate; however, a recent injury unfortunately prevented his travel to Gothenburg.

All featured filmmakers demonstrated talent and creativity, offering a vivid illustration of the incredible diversity within the field of anthropology. Through their distinct cinematic approaches and compelling narratives, they showcased how anthropology can be explored and expressed in myriad ways–from personal and intimate stories to broader social and cultural inquiries. Each film contributed unique perspectives that not only reflect the richness of anthropological inquiry but also push the boundaries of visual storytelling. A more detailed introduction to each filmmaker and their work follows below.

Introducing the films and filmmakers

Entre las plantas (Among the Plants)

Mark Lindenberg is a Dutch filmmaker and cultural anthropologist whose work lies at the intersection of ethnography and healing. His interest lies in the transformational powers that film contains and how these can be implemented and be of service for the protagonist and the audience. Lindenberg's film *Entre las plantas* (*Among the Plants*) follows an Amazonian family who collaborate with plants to support both Peruvian and international visitors. In their garden, they grow medicinal plants used for healing and for protection against harmful energies. At night, during ceremonial rituals, they connect with Ayahuasca–the 'mother of all plants'–who guides them in how to help others. Through time and careful observation, the filmmaker comes to understand the deep relationship between plants, animals, and humans in this shared space. Contact information, parts of the film and other work by Lindenberg can be found on his webpage.[3]

Pjäsen

Gustav Bengtsson is a video director, anthropologist, and artist working at the intersection of research and aesthetics. Bengtsson has developed a personal practice that combines the study of social structures, identities, and culture from both an artistic and scientific perspective. Bengtsson's film *Pjäsen* is set entirely within a theatre. The location itself plays a central, symbolic role in the performance. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theories, the film explores how space and the body interact–where time and place become tightly interwoven through the presence of the camera and the actors' movements. The story follows a small group of actors in Stockholm rehearsing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but soon shifts focus to behind-the-scenes tensions involving power, tradition, class, and artistic autonomy. Read more about Bengtsson's work on IMDb.[4]

[3] https://www.marklindenberg.com/contact/

[4] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm8056961/

Grief: Ruins of Childhood

Ignacio Rodríguez was born in Antofagasta (Chile), a city that used to be part of Bolivia until the end of the nineteenth century, but became Chilean after a war triggered by foreign economic interests upon the saltpeter industry. Having grown up in a city marked by a history of territorial dispossession, forced migration and multiculturalism, Rodríguez developed a deep interest on topics like the cultural construction of national identity, which is the focus of his current work. His film *Grief: Ruins of Childhood* illustrates this search for identity. The film depicts a deserted space with a voiceover talking about memories of a childhood in the Atacama Desert. Read more about Rodríguez's work here.[5]

Ten by Ten

Jami Bennett is an American documentary filmmaker and ethnographic researcher from the mountains of East Tennessee. She is drawn to stories about identity and notions of belonging. With her collaborative, intimate style of filmmaking (and a healthy respect for humour), she aims to craft narratives that resonate with audiences both within and beyond the academic sphere. Bennett's film *Ten by Ten* depicts Jessica and her husband Dongseop running an American diner out of their home in Jeju, South Korea. But after appearing on one of the country's most popular television programs, the couple must adjust to the shock of their newfound TV fame and navigate blurred boundaries between private life and public persona. Visit her Instagram page[6] for more information.

Oh, These Beloved Hands

Rachel Runesson is a visual anthropologist and artist passionate about investigating the world through the intersection between aesthetics and anthropology. In Runesson's film *Oh, These Beloved Hands,* she negotiates the complex tension between the positionalities of filmmaker and granddaughter–an interplay that shaped both the process and narrative of her project. Visit her webpage for more of her work and contact information. In the interview that follows, Runesson expands on the themes and intentions behind her work.

Behind the Scenes with Rachel Runesson

Rachel: *Oh, these beloved hands* follows the story of Lisbeth, my grandmother, as she begins to unpack the grief she has carried her whole life for the father she never knew. When she was three, her father passed away in a terrible car accident, and she grew up in a grieving household–the grief of which she herself never felt able to fully take part in. In the film, I use her and her sister's old dollhouse as a material metaphor for her process of remembering and grieving, and ask her to refurnish it as she delves into her past. In terms of message and feeling I suppose one could see it in two ways. On the one hand this is a research film and an audio-visual expression of my master's thesis concerning grief, old age, and storytelling. On the other hand, it is an artistic expression of a personal family story. To take one example, in my filmmaking style I wanted to use extreme closeups and intradiegetic sound to try to convey the complex emotional entanglement between people, materials, and stories: This is

[5] https://www.ethnokino.com/4thfilmfestivalharvest/the-ruins-of-a-childhood-memory

[6] https://www.instagram.com/appyjam/

both an attempt to visualise an anthropological argument, and to connect the viewer to the emotional grief of my grandmother. In many ways, it was the medium of film that allowed both of these messages to exist in the same "product".

Signe: What initially drew you to the field of visual anthropology, and what continues to inspire your work in this area?

Rachel: I remember in my undergrad I did a year abroad at the University of British Columbia in Canada, and in one of those classes the professor showed us an ethnographic film about the different ways that traditional Haida dances were expressed and mobilised in the present day. I remember thinking/feeling: this film is giving me information that writing, or even speaking, could not give. The dances, while not as present as they would have been live, could be *felt* – there's a different kind of knowledge that's able to be expressed here. I became fascinated by how the combination of moving sound and images could produce these different expressions of research, and, even more so, by *what* that difference actually *was*. This question continues to perplex and inspire me, as well as a drive to combine my artistic and scientific practice in the work that I do.

Signe: In your experience, what unique strengths does film bring to anthropological storytelling?

Rachel: I think the most obvious thing that film brings to anthropology is an expanded accessibility and potential for visibility with a broader public. The people and communities that anthropologists extract information from to build our theories and careers may not always be interested in reading monographs or articles, nor is a general audience. Holding a film screening, however, can give you the chance to show what you have done with the time participants have given you. A film also carries, I believe, a greater interdisciplinary application. I have screened *Oh these beloved hands* at a faculty of biology, medicine, and health, for a course on sacred space, and at ethnographic film festivals open to the public and other filmmakers. At each of these events, the discussions that emerged and conclusions that were drawn were vastly different. Viewing is a type of shared experience, and what is sparked from it depends on who is watching (this is true of reading too, of course, but it is perhaps more difficult to read a book simultaneously with 50-80 people, in an hour's time). On another level, I also strongly believe that film makes for a different kind of anthropology in terms of theory, not just communication. This is a whole can of worms in itself, and I won't get into all the discussions, but suffice it to ask here: if our theoretical frameworks are adapted to text (because we write our theories down) then how might these frameworks morph, disappear, or be added to if they are adapted to an audio-visual form, which can work with such different kinds of knowledge?

Signe: Visual anthropology is sometimes criticised for oversimplifying complex cultural narratives or privileging the filmmaker's perspective. How do you navigate these challenges in your own work?

Rachel: Great question! I think my best response is probably a counter question—what type of anthropology does not, in its quest to condense a piece of ultimately incondensable reality, both simplify cultural narratives and base their conclusions through what they have experienced in the field? So, in that sense, I navigate these challenges in much the same way as I would navigate them as a traditional fieldworker—by being critically aware of my own position, by putting my participants before my research/film work, and by being clear about the fact that the final edit of what I produce (both film and text) is ultimately a slice of an

interpretation of a lived reality which I made for particular reasons and to particular effects– not a reproduction of that reality. Of course, film holds special challenges that must be considered, especially in a world that often confuses visibility for objectivity. The presence of the camera will have a particular effect on your participants, and it is a skill to know when to record and when to not, and even to know when a particular research project may not benefit from an audio-visual approach. As with traditional anthropology, there are ways to ensure that the perspective of the researcher is not dominating the research, but ultimately what is produced will always be filtered through the perspective of the filmmaker/anthropologist. The details of anthropological context must be discussed when screening ethnographic films with anthropological intent. Don't get me wrong, I am a writer, I love to write, and I think this medium of doing research is crucial. I do not think, however, that its usefulness diminishes the use of film as research because, as I mentioned, they accomplish different things. Of course, as with anything, my passion for non-textual methods in anthropology also stems from myself as a person: What I enjoy, how I think, and what brings me energy and inspiration.

Signe*:* Thank you so much, Rachel, for sharing your film and taking the time to talk with us about your vision.

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The organisation of World Anthropology Day by SANT would not have been possible without the very generous contributions of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG), and we hope to be able to continue this successful collaboration and proceed with spreading the subject of anthropology and what it contributes to.