

The Interdisciplinary Interplay Between “the Scientific” and “the Aesthetic” in Mantas Kvedaravičius’s *Barzakh*

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The paper¹ delves into the persistent tension between “the scientific” and “the aesthetic” dimensions within ethnographic filmmaking, particularly through the lens of observational cinema. Historically, ethnographic films, often produced by anthropologists, have faced scepticism within the discipline, perceived as a threat to ethnographic authority. However, the paradigmatic shift in ethnography – from a mere collection of data to a nuanced dialogue and exchange – and the emergence of observational cinema have challenged the traditional perception of ethnographic film. Hence, this paper centres its analysis on *Barzakh* (2011), a groundbreaking nonfiction film by Mantas Kvedaravičius, a notable Lithuanian anthropologist-turned-filmmaker who was tragically killed in Mariupol, Ukraine, in April 2022. Through the exploration of *Barzakh*, made while Kvedaravičius conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Chechnya between 2006 and 2009, the paper aims to contribute to the broader conversation on the dynamic relationship between “the scientific” and “the aesthetic” in ethnographic films, emphasizing the continued fluidity and evolution of this cinematic genre.

Keywords: Mantas Kvedaravičius, ethnography, observational cinema, *Barzakh*.

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*He merges the two bodies of fresh and salt
water, yet between them is a barrier they never cross.²*

Ethnographic film, particularly when created by anthropologists or those with an anthropological background, embodies a fundamental tension which revolves around two perspectives: “the scientific” and “the aesthetic.”³ This tension, or, to certain extent, conflict, implies an inevitable oscillation between art and science in the realm of ethnographic film-making. However, the interdisciplinary nature of ethnographic film for the better part of twentieth century was not embraced by anthropologists. On the contrary, ethnographic film has been regarded by majority of anthropologists not as a credible mode of seeing, understanding, and, eventually, representing the subject matter but as an implicit threat to assertions of ethnographic authority as it was associated with popular culture rather than scientific endeavour. As a result, the films made by anthropologists were a hybrid product that satisfied neither scientific rigor nor cinematic art.⁴

The so-called crisis of ethnographic authority in the 1980s significantly contributed to a paradigmatic shift in the conception of ethnography and ethnographic film. The process of ethnographic research is now seen as a dialogue, a conversation, or an exchange between different parties. This contrasts with the earlier view of ethnography as a mere collection of data or a procedural scientific interpretation.⁵ Moreover, this shift has opened a space for the future and for the ability to recognise new things.⁶ Anthropologists have begun to use a wide range of artistic tools in their practice as well as to take a more liberal and conceptual approach to ethnographic film.

One of the factors that has drawn the attention of anthropologists to the potential of ethnographic film is the realization, as argued by Timothy

2 Qur'an 55:19-20, *Quran.com*, accessed December 30, 2023, <https://quran.com/en/ar-rahman/18-42>.

3 Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), ix.

4 Jean Rouch, *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. and trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 36.

5 Anna Grimshaw, “Eyeing the Field: New Horizons for Visual Anthropology,” in *Visualizing Anthropology*, eds. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005), 25.

6 James Clifford, *Kultūros problema. XX amžiaus etnografija, literatūra ir menas* (Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2006), 33.

Asch and others, that the camera's greatest value lies not only in its ability to capture and preserve disappearing cultures but also in its capacity to reveal and record phenomena imperceptible to the human eye.⁷ This insight led to the development of observational cinema, which eventually became one of the most popular cinematic approaches in ethnographic filmmaking.

Mark McCarty, while discussing *The Village* (1967), a pioneering attempt by him and Paul Hockings to create an ethnographic film grounded in the observational cinema approach, defined observational cinema as a presentation of culture devoid of direction, staging, reconstruction, or fictionalization.⁸ Consequently, the objective of ethnographic film based on an observational cinema approach was not to narrate a story, justify a thesis, or convey an idea, or to orchestrate the performance of a ritual. Instead, its purpose was to capture the multilayered nature of events, cultivate new ways of seeing, and evoke empathy for humanity.⁹ Anthropologists, by embracing observational cinema, believed they could now produce films that were not only of high quality and immersive nature but also legitimate products of anthropological activity.

However, despite the emergence and development of observational cinema, there have been, and to some extents, still are, doubts regarding the capability of ethnographic films to represent and construct anthropological knowledge. For instance, anthropologist Maurice Bloch, when asked in an interview about the ethnographic film's capacity to reach a broader public, argued:

What ethnographic film – and especially the ethnographic films which are being made at the moment – are trying to do is give the idea that if you just stare at people, if you just hear their words out of context, you've learnt something about them. This idea that ethnographic film speaks for itself is what is wrong. The kind of thing one tries to teach in anthropology is, if you just stare at exotic scenes and listen to the things that people are saying without knowing

- 7 Timothy Asch, John Marshall, and Peter Spier, "Ethnographic Film: Structure and Function," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 2 (1973): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.02.100173.001143>.
- 8 Mark McCarty, "McCarty's Law and How to Break It," in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings, (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003), 70.
- 9 Emilie de Brigard, "The History of Ethnographic Film," in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003), 38.

anything about these people, you understand less about them than if you have never seen them or heard them.¹⁰

In his critique of observational cinema, Bloch consistently emphasizes the notion that visual material is merely illustrative and not constitutive of anthropological knowledge. He further argues that a comprehensive understanding is unattainable without considering broader cultural and contextual factors. However, this critique holds validity primarily when ethnographic films are assessed in terms of their scholarly value and informativeness – measuring how much knowledge they convey. Yet, Lucien Taylor raises a thought-provoking question in his article “Iconophobia”: “What if film doesn’t speak at all?”¹¹ This prompts a consideration of ethnographic film as an intellectual investigation conducted through audiovisual means rather than exclusively by verbal methods. To put it bluntly, what if the evaluation of ethnographic film extends beyond the confines of anthropological discourse and delves into the broader context of the history and aesthetics of cinema?

Nowadays, according to Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, the formal qualities of ethnographic films, conceptualized as aesthetic categories, are integral considerations alongside issues of perception, thematic preferences, and ethical concerns.¹² Noteworthy anthropologists such as Véréna Paravel, Pachó Velez, Stephanie Spray, Jeff Silva, and others have produced films that elevate aesthetic considerations to the same level as ethnographic content. Their work, characterized by diverse visual and sensory practices, exemplifies a current trend where the demand for ethnographic films to redefine themselves solely as art has become superfluous.

Nevertheless, the tension between “the scientific” and “the aesthetic” modes in the ethnographic filmmaking persists.¹³ Firstly, the interest and skill of the filmmaker can, in many cases, overshadow that of the

10 Gustaaf Houtman, “Interview with Maurice Bloch,” *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1988): 20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3032876>.

11 Lucien Taylor, “Iconophobia: How Anthropology Lost It at The Movies,” *Transition* 69 (1996): 86, doi:10.2307/2935240.

12 Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema. Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life* (Bloomington, and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 161.

13 For further exploration of the history of ethnographic film, its aesthetic and ontological dimensions, and the distinction between anthropology as a scientific process and/or

ethnographer, and vice versa.¹⁴ In simpler terms, a film may be founded on excellent ethnographic research but lack artistic quality, and vice versa. Secondly, while ethnographic cinema has evolved beyond its illustrative nature to become conceptually original, contributing analytical content to anthropological discourse, anthropologists still grapple with a singular definition of ethnographic film.

Therefore, this article engages in the ongoing discourse surrounding the interdisciplinary interplay between “the scientific” and “the aesthetic” in ethnographic films, particularly within the framework of observational cinema. The analysis centres on *Barzakh* (2011), a film made by Mantas Kvedaravičius, a distinguished Lithuanian anthropologist-turned-filmmaker who was killed by Russian military in April 2022 during the siege of Mariupol while filming his latest film.

***Barzakh*: how to make an ethnographic film in the Counter-Terrorism Zone**

While Kvedaravičius’s other films, both nonfiction (*Mariupolis* (2016), *Prologos* (2022), and *Mariupolis 2* (2022, co-directed with Hanna Bilobrova and edited posthumously)) and fiction (*Parthenon* (2019)), employ a diverse range of techniques associated with ethnographic filmmaking, such as observational cinema, participatory cinema, sensory ethnography, *Barzakh* is selected as a case study for several reasons.

Firstly, it is the inaugural full-length nonfiction film by Kvedaravičius. Despite his lack of formal training in filmmaking prior to *Barzakh*,¹⁵ the film premiered at the Docpoint Documentary Film Festival in 2011 and quickly gained international recognition, solidifying its position as one of the most distinguished Lithuanian documentary films since the country regained independence in 1990. As a result, *Barzakh* not only serves as the catalyst for Kvedaravičius’s filmmaking career but also signifies a significant ethnographic shift in Lithuanian cinema.

artistic endeavour, refer to: Narius Kairys, “Antropologas su kino kamera: tarp judančio vaizdo ir teksto,” *Logos* 109 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.24101/logos.2021.91>.

14 Margaret Mead, “Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words,” in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003), 7.

15 Renata Šukaitytė, “Contemporary Lithuanian Documentary Cinema: A Critical Overview of Main Film Directions,” *Apertúra* (Fall 2021), <https://doi.org/10.31176/apertura.2021.17.1.9>.

Secondly, filmed between 2006 and 2009, *Barzakh* is deeply rooted in Kvedaravičius's ethnographic fieldwork in Chechnya, conducted for his PhD dissertation in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Consequently, *Barzakh* serves a dual role as both research material and a product of artistic research,¹⁶ intricately woven into the fabric of the ethnographic inquiry. In this manner, the documentary, and the dissertation, titled *Knots of Absence: Death, Dreams, and Disappearances at the Limits of Law in the Counter-Terrorism Zone of Chechnya*, which Kvedaravičius completed a year after the film's premiere, in 2012, not only share a common foundation in the ethnographic inquiry but also complement each other, offering a unique opportunity to engage with distinct modes of ethnographic thinking defined by the ontological distinction between text and film.

However, it is important to note that initially, Kvedaravičius did not have the goal or intention to create a film about his research subjects – specifically, the women in Chechnya on their quest to find sons, husbands, and relatives who disappeared in the aftermath of the Second Chechen War. In the beginning, as Kvedaravičius states, the aim of the research was to narrate “an ethnographic story of the unsettling everyday events, of the production and experience of disappearance, torture, and covert violence that constitute the affective register of the Counter-Terrorism Zone in Chechnya.”¹⁷ Only later, when his ethnographic research was well underway, did the idea emerge to make a film based on dreams in which people see their missing loved ones. In Kvedaravičius's own words:

The camera came by chance when locals started talking about their dreams – how they imagine their missing loved ones, how sometimes the missing actually appear in the prisons that appeared in the dream. I found the connection between reality and dreams interesting. How can one capture a dream? What is the state of reality?¹⁸

- 16 Susanna Hast, *Sound of War. Aesthetics, Emotions and Chechnya* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2018), 67.
- 17 Mantas Kvedaravičius, “Knots of absence: death, dreams, and disappearances at the limits of law in the Counter-Terrorism Zone of Chechnya” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2012), 3.
- 18 Viktorija Valantytė and Asta Dilytė, “Mantas Kvedaravičius: Mirtis yra labai svarbus dalykas, kaip ir meilė. Tuo labiau, jie labai susiję tarpusavyje,” *sociologai.lt*, March 3, 2014, accessed December 30, 2023, <https://sociologai.lt/2014/m-kvedaravicius-%E2%80%99Etu-klausai-nes-tau-idomu-ka-zmogus-turi-pasakyti-o-ne-ka-tu-turi-apie-ji-paklausti/>.

Thus, Kvedaravičius embarked on filming, accumulating approximately 100 hours of material, to capture the ambiguous and contradictory reality faced by nearly every Chechen family in their daily lives.¹⁹ Choosing film as his medium was not prompted by a “lack of words,” as suggested by one film critic,²⁰ nor was it an intention to transition from anthropology to filmmaking. Instead, Kvedaravičius perceived film as a potent tool to convey the transition from the real to the imaginary world, where “life and death, absence and presence, invisibility and sight, fact and fiction, no longer held a determinable place.”²¹

Furthermore, he sought to depict the inner state of the film’s characters – the uncertainty of mothers waiting for news about their loved ones, the investigative efforts of human rights lawyer Ahmed Gisaev, and the harrowing experiences of Alaudi Sadykov, who was tortured and mutilated by the police in 2002. In this context, the film’s title can be construed as a metaphor describing the inner state of being between two spaces and temporalities experienced by the protagonists and others living in Chechnya during the period when the film was made. Translated from Arabic, “barzakh” signifies a limit or boundary separating two entities (as in the quote from the Qu’ran at the beginning of this article); however, it also holds a theological connotation rooted in Islam, signifying the existence of an intermediate realm where the subsequent differentiation of destinations for the virtuous and the wicked occurs.²² Furthermore, according to Kvedaravičius, “barzakh” is not merely a metaphor finding embodiment in the film through images of water; it is also a paradigm upon which the film is constructed to elucidate the distinctive characteristics of life in Chechnya and demonstrate how these intricacies intertwine.²³ Hence, the term “barzakh” can be

19 Russia took control of Grozny in the early 2000s; nonetheless, the conflict endured even after the cessation of full-scale offensives. Chechnya held the status of a Counter-Terrorist Zone until 2009. During this period, Russian subsidies contributed to the reconstruction of Chechnya, but concurrently, instances of violence, torture, and kidnapping escalated (see Kvedaravičius, “Knots of absence: death, dreams, and disappearances at the limits of law in the Counter-Terrorism Zone of Chechnya”).

20 Rasa Paukštytė, “„Mariupolis 2“. Kanų fragmentas,” *lfc.lt*, May 19, 2022, accessed December 30, 2023, <https://www.lfc.lt/lt/Page=ArticleList&ID=17352>.

21 Kvedaravičius, “Knots of absence: death, dreams, and disappearances at the limits of law in the Counter-Terrorism Zone of Chechnya,” 3.

22 *The Qur’an: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 114.

23 Mantas Kvedaravičius, *Barzakh*, Pressbook. Extimacy Films, 2011.

regarded as an aesthetic concept, both politically and conceptually, shaping the unique approach employed in crafting this particular film.

Even though Kvedaravičius compares his film to a “dream experienced while sitting in a darkened cinema hall,”²⁴ *Barzakh*²⁵ is not strictly a poetic documentary (especially in the tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary) or a dreamlike fiction film. The primary cinematic strategy employed in this film is rooted in the observational cinema approach. As argued by Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, observational cinema emerged as a departure from ethnographic film, which adhered to the scientific paradigm of using the camera as a recording tool to collect data for research and analysis.²⁶ Therefore, observational cinema prioritizes cultural signs and seemingly inconspicuous visual details, such as gestures, behaviour, facial expressions, etc. It utilizes long shots to capture the rhythm of everyday life or specific events significant to the community being filmed, emphasizing their singular importance and their temporal and spatial continuity.

Barzakh explores a diverse range of Chechen cultural elements, unveiling them through everyday rituals and customs. Examples include the memorable wedding episode featuring machine gun volleys in the air, the traditional Chechen dance Lezginka,²⁷ and the bread distribution accompanied by men singing. It is crucial to emphasize that these elements don't serve an illustrative function in the film. According to Kvedaravičius, “Every little thing or action, even a boy washing his feet, is an important

24 Rasa Paukštytė, “Premjera “Kino pavasaryje.” *Barzakh*. Dvi minutės yra daug...”. *lfc.lt*, March 10, 2011, accessed December 30, 2023, <https://www.lfc.lt/lt/Page=ArticleList&ID=8543>.

25 One approach to analysing *Barzakh* involves delving into the discourse of cinema and dreams. According to Laura Rascaroli, the dream is a persistent metaphor in both classical and modern film theory (Laura Rascaroli, “Oneiric Metaphor in Film Theory,” *Kinema, A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* (November 2002), doi: <https://doi.org/10.15353/kinema.vi.982>). Cinema not only provides the means to depict dreams and alter visible reality but also operates with a logic akin to that of a dream. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Kvedaravičius echoes this sentiment in an interview when asked about the motivation behind making *Barzakh*. While the dream metaphor could be valuable for analysing *Barzakh*, I intentionally omit this aspect to concentrate on aesthetic considerations related to ethnographic film which is the goal of this article.

26 Grimshaw and Ravetz, *Observational Cinema. Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, ix–x.

27 More on the dance scene in *Barzakh*, see the analysis by Susanna Hast, *Sound of War. Aesthetics, Emotions and Chechnya*.



1. Still from *Barzakh*
(00.02.36)

Filmo *Barzakh* kadras

part of reality. And I tried to include in the film exactly those details that open hermeneutical meanings.”²⁸ Therefore, *Barzakh* prioritizes the details of everyday life for people who persist in experiencing the state of war, even though the war officially ended long ago.

As David MacDougall observes, a significant achievement of observational cinema is precisely that “the camera” has learned to look again.²⁹ Additionally, the camera has become a keen listener. This transformation involves discarding elements like the omniscient anonymous voice-over, manipulative or illustrative soundtracks, and extensive interviews (except in specific methodological cases). Instead, the focus has shifted to capturing characters in their natural surroundings, emphasizing not only what they say but also how they speak and where. As Colin Young notes, “It was almost as if ‘talkies’ were starting all over again, but this time in the right way.”³⁰ In *Barzakh*, the significance extends beyond the spoken words and shared stories of the locals; it embraces silence as a powerful means of communication. For instance, one of the initial scenes in the film depicts a family initiating legal proceedings to uncover the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a family member. Two children stand in the back near the cupboard installed in the wall, while two women, one sitting and the other standing at the table, are in front. After the full shot, a series of close-ups capture each family member separately as they tilt their faces down in

28 Paukštytė, “Premjera “Kino pavasaryje”. *Barzakh*. Dvi minutės yra daug...”.

29 David MacDougall, “Beyond Observational Cinema,” in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003), 125.

30 Colin Young, “Observational Cinema,” in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003), 106.

silence. Through this sequence, the essence of observational cinema – centred on seeing and hearing – is quite palpable.

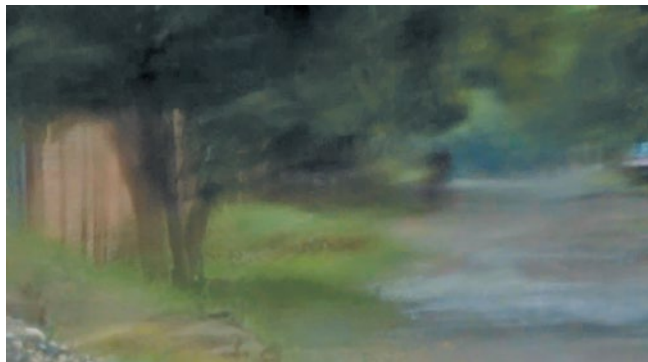
However, Kvedaravičius seems to convey that film, as an art form, does not always adhere to rigid methodologies. In his words, “If cinema doesn’t allow a subjective prism, it will be an ideology. The more open a film is to different interpretations, the better it is.”³¹ The opening shot of *Barzakh* provides a poignant example. Filmed through a window, the scene captures an old woman walking and praying for her disappeared son on the street. Traditionally, a window in cinema signifies transparency and invisibility, offering a realistic view of the diegetic world that persists even when the camera is turned off.³² This might lead one to interpret *Barzakh* as a classic ethnographic film, acting as a window into a specific cultural reality, aligning with social science expectations. However, such an interpretation would be profoundly mistaken.

Firstly, the image of the woman in the street is intentionally blurry, not due to any post-production filter but because of rain-smeared window glass. This reflects the reality of the moment the shot was taken, offering an intentionally ambiguous view to the observer. In other words, the camera deliberately avoids providing a clear depiction of the reality. Secondly, while there is no doubt that this scene is not staged, it would be impossible to hear (but not to record) the prayer by sitting and observing the street from inside the house. In the film, the filmmaker decides whether the viewer sees less but hears more or vice versa. Hence, the inaugural shot of *Barzakh* reveals the medium itself, emphasizing its material uniqueness. Moreover, the film does not merely present an objective representation of reality to the audience, whether a scientific professional or a regular viewer; instead, it opens the door to multiple interpretations.

While there is no single methodology for making a film based on the observational cinema approach as it depends on various factors, anthropologists unanimously stress the necessity for filmmakers to have a profound

31 Virginija Rimkuvienė, “Mantas Kvedaravičius: Karas leidžia išgyventi galios, malonumo būti šalia mirties jausmą,” *moteris.lt*, August 19, 2016, accessed December 30, 2023, <https://www.moteris.lt/lt/veidai/g-34017-m-kvedaravicius-karas-leidzia-isgyventi-galios-malonumo-buti-salia-mirties-jausma>.

32 Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Kino teorija: įvadas per juslių prizmę* (Vilnius: Mintis, 2012), 26.



2. Still from *Barzakh*
(00.00.14)

Filmo *Barzakh* kadras

understanding of the culture they are documenting. This involves not only adequate preparation but also a substantial period of immersion in the culture. Mark McCarty contends that a minimum of three months is essential to accumulate sufficient material for a film, allowing time to overcome culture shock, learn the language, and establish connections with informants.³³ In essence, a “come-in-shooting-and-get-out-fast” approach³⁴ is deemed inadequate for crafting a meaningful ethnographic film.

As previously mentioned, Kvedaravičius undertook the filming of *Barzakh* from 2006 to 2009. During this period, he spent approximately a year residing with several Chechen families, navigating the challenging task of building trust in a deeply unstable environment where suspicions towards foreigners were pervasive.³⁵ Kvedaravičius aimed to document the nuanced lived experiences of the subjects and forge a distinct connection with the audience compared to written text. To paraphrase Jean Rouch, the essence of cinema lies in the direct address of the Other from the screen to the viewer.³⁶ Consequently, establishing the relationships with locals proved integral to the success of the film, both anthropologically and cinematically.

However, as the filmmaker becomes an active participant in the cultural milieu, a fundamental ethical dilemma arises in observational cinema. Ethnographic film transcends mere documentation of another society or

33 McCarty, “McCarty’s Law and How to Break It,” 70.

34 Heider, *Ethnographic Film*, 5.

35 Valantytė and Dilytė, “Mantas Kvedaravičius: Mirtis yra labai svarbus dalykas, kaip ir meilė. Tuo labiau, jie labai susiję tarpusavyje.”

36 Jean Rouch, “A Life on the Edge of Film and Anthropology,” interview by Lucien Taylor, Jean Rouch, *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. and trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 140.

culture;³⁷ such a film is a testimony to the encounter between representatives of different cultures. Thus, in observational cinema, observation is seen primarily as an ethical position.³⁸ Some anthropologists-turned-filmmakers who advocated for observational cinema believed in minimal interaction with the reality they were filming, assuming that capturing day-to-day behaviour required a hands-off approach. However, this assumption overlooked a crucial fact – the anthropologist is not a passive observer, but a presence actively engaged with a camera. As MacDougall argues, “The person with the camera has a clear job, which is to film. His characters are aware of this, and therefore allow him to do it.”³⁹ Thus, the anthropologist is not a detached observer but one who seeks to observe from within. Selectivity, subjectivity, and situatedness are crucial concepts that cannot be eliminated, even though they may seem to challenge the anthropologist’s scientific authority. Importantly, those engaged in observational cinema should reflect on their own relationship with the culture they are filming, thereby deconstructing the notion of an omniscient, objective narrator.

Through his film, Kvedaravičius challenges the notion of “objective reality” on the screen, underscoring the filmmaker’s personal perspective manifested through the embodied camera and his ethical engagement with the film’s subjects. The ethnographer’s involvement reaches a heightened level in the film’s conclusion when Kvedaravičius boldly inserts his hand into the frame, presenting handwritten notes about the film’s protagonists. The final note takes a significant leap, as Kvedaravičius personally accuses Ramzan Kadyrov, the President of the Chechen Republic, of the murder of journalist Natalya Estemirova in 2009. This move carries profound implications. In his own words:

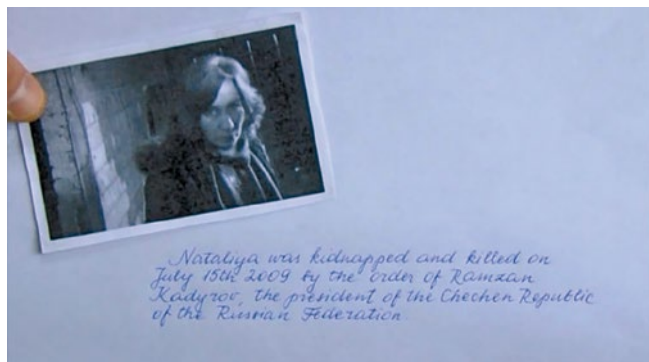
It is virtually impossible to remain neutral. In general, it’s worth asking what you are doing it for, whether it’s a film or a research paper. What are you trying to say? I wouldn’t call the finale of the film political, that’s my position.⁴⁰

37 MacDougall, “Beyond Observational Cinema,” 125.

38 Grimshaw and Ravetz, *Observational Cinema. Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, x.

39 MacDougall, “Beyond Observational Cinema,” 119.

40 Paukštytė, “Premjera “Kino pavasaryje”. *Barzakh*. Dvi minutės yra daug...”.



3. Still from *Barzakh*
(00.55.58)

Filmo *Barzakh* kadras

Thus, Kvedaravičius does not assume the role of a neutral observer of reality; the position of being “a fly on the wall” is alien to him. Not only is his gaze subjective in interpreting reality, but he reinforces his involvement by placing his signature on the accusations at the film’s end. Therefore, he openly declares his participation in the film not only as a filmmaker whose body is observable in the frame through the movements of the camera but also as a direct and visible participant. Furthermore, due to this engagement, he was acutely aware of the potential consequences awaiting him, including the risk of not only becoming a persona non grata in Russia but also a potential target for Russian and Chechen authorities; yet, all anthropologists know that their profession is not separate from their life.⁴¹

Conclusions

As articulated by Clifford Geertz, ethnography is more than just fieldwork tasks like building connections, selecting informants, and documenting various aspects.⁴² Geertz introduces the concept of “thick description”, emphasizing that ethnographic work is an intellectual endeavour. Lucien Taylor extends this idea to ethnographic film, suggesting that it can also provide “thick descriptions.”⁴³ *Barzakh* can be precisely considered as such. Along with other works by Kvedaravičius, the film challenges narrative determination, inviting viewers to transcend predetermined representations of culture on screen. Kvedaravičius intentionally avoids presenting decontextualized brutality and sensationalising violence. Instead, he aims to

41 Valantytė and Dilytė, “Mantas Kvedaravičius: Mirtis yra labai svarbus dalykas, kaip ir meilė. Tuo labiau, jie labai susiję tarpusavyje.”

42 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

43 Taylor, “Iconophobia: How Anthropology Lost It at The Movies,” 86.

express the everyday horror of Chechnya differently. Hence, according to Sussana Hast, *Barzakh* constructs a political reality without a commitment to absolute truth, portraying a new aesthetic world.⁴⁴

In essence, *Barzakh* offers a nuanced exploration of Chechen life and the ethical complexities inherent in observational cinema and ethnographic film in general. Consequently, Kvedaravičius's film underscores the interconnectedness of ethnographic research and film art, advocating for interdisciplinary collaboration between "the scientific" and "the aesthetic." By defying ethnographic conventions, *Barzakh* prompts a re-evaluation of our understanding of ethnographic film. This particular film proves that the concept of ethnographic film remains fluid, varying based on the ideological stance of the anthropologist, the film's context, and its form and content.

Moreover, like other contemporary ethnographic films,⁴⁵ *Barzakh* resists easy categorization within a singular discourse, whether art or anthropology. Instead, it emerges as interdisciplinary work, reflecting a departure from anthropology's attempt to mimic art or appropriate traditionally art-associated practices. Rather than imitation, Kvedaravičius's film represents an endeavour to foster a creative exchange between anthropology and art. This exchange gains particular relevance as ethnographic films continue to diversify with the advent of new digital audiovisual technologies. Thus, *Barzakh*, regarded as one of the most prominent contemporary ethnographic film examples, shows that ethnographic film as a genre actively seeks innovative ways of seeing, knowing, and experiencing aspects that would otherwise remain invisible, disregarded, or ignored.

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44 Hast, *Sound of War. Aesthetics, Emotions and Chechnya*, 73.

45 For instance, Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Leviathan* (2012), *Caniba* (2017), John Paul Sniadecki *Foreign Parts* (2009), Joshua Bonnetta *El Mar La Mar* (2017), Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez *Manakamana* (2013).

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Santrauka

Tarpdisciplininė „mokslinio“ ir „estetinio“ kriterijų sąveika Manto Kvedaravičiaus filme *Barzakh*

Narius Kairys

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Mantas Kvedaravičius, stebėjimo kinas, *Barzakh*, etnografija.

Straipsnyje pasitelkus stebėjimo kino perspektyvą nagrinėjama nuolatinė įtampa tarp „mokslinio“ ir „estetinio“ kriterijų etnografiniame kine. Didžiąją XX a. dalį dauguma antropolog(i)ų skeptiškai vertino etnografinius filmus, kuriuose įžvelgė grėsmę antropologijos kaip mokslo autoritetui. Tačiau paradigminis etnografijos pokytis – nuo paprasto duomenų rinkimo iki niuansuoto dialogo ir mainų tarp įvairių šalių – ir stebėjimo kino atsiradimas metė iššūkį tradiciniam etnografinio filmo suvokimui. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamas novatoriškas Manto Kvedaravičiaus, žymaus lietuvių antropologo ir kino kūrėjo, tragiškai žuvusio 2022 metų balandį Ukrainoje, Mariupolyje, dokumentinis filmas *Barzakh* (2011), kurį rengdamas socialinės antropologijos krypties disertaciją jis sukūrė vykdydamas etnografinį lauko tyrimą Čečėnijoje. Nagrinėjant filmą, straipsnyje siekiama prisidėti prie platesnės diskusijos apie dinamišką „mokslinio“ ir „estetinio“ kriterijų santykį etnografiniuose filmuose, pabrėžiant nuolatinę šio kino žanro kaitą.