

Looking Good

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Cristina Grasseni 2009. *Developing Skill, Developing Vision: Practices of Locality at the Foot of the Alps*. (European Anthropology in Translation). Oxford: Berghahn.

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Cristina Grasseni's new book, part of Berghahn's "European Anthropology in Translation" series, illustrates how far anthropology and the tradition of European community studies has moved from studies of villages to studies in villages (to paraphrase Geertz). The keywords of Grasseni's study are not the old social norms, values and mechanisms, nor even "identity" per se, but rather skill, enskillment, and practices of vision. Inspired most directly by the Phenomenology of Ingold and the Actor-Network Theory of Latour, Grasseni explores the ways that cattle breeders, in and around the mountain village of Vedeseta in the Valtaleggio region of the Italian Alps, go about the process of learning, transmitting and adapting their practices against a background of shifting social norms, EU regulations and global shifts in breeding knowledge, practice and evaluation. She is most directly interested in practices of looking and seeing, and how they are inflected by local and global systems of meaning and moral evaluation.

Developing Skill, Developing Vision, then, doesn't read like a traditional ethnography, but rather an ethnographically-grounded series of reflections on issues of method and theory in anthropological understandings of the role of skilled, sensorily embodied practice in human collective life and relations with the environment. While focused on the practices of a group of cattle-breeders living in Vedeseta, Grasseni does not take "place" as a stable point for her analysis, but rather sees it as

“an unfolding practice of belonging...an event rather than...a location” (38), which is, in fact, reproduced and reinvented in the process of adapting “local” skills and practices to “surviv[al] in the global market” (184).

Methodologically, Grasseni’s book explores interesting questions about the use of visual anthropology techniques in studying skilled vision. She analyses her own evolving use of video, critiquing some of the embedded assumptions of disappearing worlds that seemed to be inseparable from ethnographic film, moving to a more reflexive use of video which argues that anthropological participant-observation must be understood as an “apprenticeship of the eye.” As she writes (91):

"The filmic anthropology could not just be about stressing the image-storing capacity of recording technologies, but rather about using them as facilitators for the ethnographer’s access into a structured perceptual environment. I am claiming that an apprenticeship of the eye can further our ethnographic understanding of how practice and skills construct identities. This training of perception is intrinsic to the social structuring of practice, and is achieved by attuning oneself to the rhythms and sensitivities of a complex environment".

Thus, in attempting to capture the breeders’ “skilled vision” through her camera, Grasseni was gaining an apprenticeship, or an “education of attention” (as Ingold calls it), in how to properly look at cattle. By attending to the ways that cattle breeders showed her how to look, how they themselves used video and other recording media as part of their training in how to see their cattle, and reproducing the important distinctions in cattle breed, Grasseni doesn’t reject vision as Western and imperialist, but moves toward understanding it as part of a multisensory practice. She illustrates these notions, and leads into the analysis that follows, by showing how breeders in looking at fellow breeders’ stables, derive information about their skill, their network of information about the availability of bull semen, their adaptation of industrial architecture to the demands of mountain farming, their political connections that allowed them to work bureaucracies for proper permissions. In other words, in a description that recalled to me Alfred Gell’s notion of abducted agency, she argues that skilled vision reveals the display of “a large network of people and competencies supporting their enterprise, weaving the ‘traditional’ skills of cattle rearing, milking and cheese-making together with the ‘new’ skills of trading in genetically evaluated cattle, milking in high-tech parlours and securing state aid” (96).

The second half of the book gives a detailed description and analysis of these interrelated processes. Grasseni is particularly concerned to think through notions of changing skill in relation to so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ practices of breeding, taking up tensions in the discussions of Ingold and Latour as to whether global, abstract, capitalist processes lead to a decline of sensorily embodied skills or a transfer of skills from tool-using humans to black-boxed technologies. She examines these questions through key points in the process of cattle farming: the process of breeding, the milking parlour, and the production and marketing of “traditional” cheese.

In considering selective breeding, Grasseni describes the role of expert knowledge and standardizing artefacts in creating the international standards which discipline the vision of the community of practice of breeders and farmers. These artefacts include the forms and tables which breeders must fill out to evaluate cattle, which make possible the “partitioning gaze” and the

quantification of the animal into a set of traits that allow the cattle to be compared “according to a single standard of reference, through numbers and listings that are published and circulated on the internet” (141). They also include the trophy cow replicas and toy cows which circulate in the community, the ubiquity and everydayness of which allow for the inculcation of values in relation to the proper appearance of cattle. And they include social occasions such as the cattle fairs, which allow for the display of expertise and the further solidification of the criteria for judging animals. She also explores the tensions between aesthetics and functionality, and the universalizing, abstracting criteria of genetics and quantifiable morphology with the “concrete contexts” by which farmers make judgments about the appropriateness of cattle to particular conditions and “assumptions about what is virtuous knowledge and what makes virtuous conduct for a breeder” (159-160). Genetics, for example, is seen as providing a blueprint for the production of high quality cattle, but Grasseni shows that there is much taken on faith in investing ones resources in the discourse and knowledge of genetics—outcomes are based on all sorts of “local” and non-specifiable factors that used to be considered part of a breeder’s “instinct” (149). This insight provides a model for the relationship between “expert” and “local” knowledge more generally, as it is negotiated by the farmers of the Valtaleggio. But this doesn’t mean that these approaches are on a level playing field. Here, as below, farmers are forced to balance the high value given to discourses and practices of so-called “modernity” with the advantages of local knowledge and so-called “tradition,” and the moral and aesthetic commitments that go with an emplaced sense of cattle rearing practice.

In the case of the milking parlour, Grasseni shows that the mechanization of aspects of the milking process does not lead to a diminution of human skills. Even if certain senses, such as the vision to monitor the processes of milking rather than the more tactile aspects of hand milking, suggest a distancing or perhaps even alienation of humans and cows, Grasseni suggests that farmers still value the skills required in “a competent response to the animals’ reactions, needs and idiosyncrasies...Guiglielmo insists that each cow is different and that one needs to know how to bend the machine to her idiosyncrasies” (121), thus arguing for the ongoing “intimate relationship between milkers and cows” in the mechanized milking parlour.

Similarly, and recalling Latour’s work on laboratory life, Grasseni shows in the cheese making process the need for apprenticeship and interpretation even in the process of reading a “standardizing” device such as a thermometer (125). She concludes that “there is no zero-sum game of skill and technology by which an increase of technology means a decrease in skill in absolute terms. Here, however, Grasseni’s ethnography of such aspects of the cheese-making process seems a bit thin, and might be usefully read in conjunction with Heather Paxson’s (2008) work on this topic.

Indeed, Grasseni’s interest in cheese making focuses more on how changes in the presentation of the process are being made in response to EU hygiene regulations and tourist interest in “local” food products. Grasseni argues that much of the “skill” involved resides in the farmer’s capacity “to adapt or calibrate standard procedures to local recipes and ‘traditional tastes’” (128). It becomes a balancing act for farmers to package the cheese, in fancy, evocative wrapping, and “package” themselves, in videos and documentaries designed for urban and tourist consumption, as practitioners of a “local” tradition in close contact with an outsider’s nostalgic imagining of

nature and peasant life, while still adapting to and adopting many aspects of current technology, standardization and bureaucratic demands. “Idyllic landscapes and pasteurized milk!” as Grasseni summarizes. While this part of Grasseni’s argument will be familiar to those in tourism studies or in food studies, she usefully traces how the ability to preserve “local” identity resides in the ability to smoothly negotiate and adapt to “global” bureaucratic protocols and capitalist markets. Thus, she stresses the irony that “local” products often imply much more than “local” skills (187).

I recommend this book to readers of this weblog interested in a rich ethnographic engagement with some of the key issues of materiality, skill, the senses and emplacement arising from the work of Ingold and Latour, and from the concerns of apprenticeship studies and visual anthropology. At the same time, it is an important contribution to revitalizing European community studies by combining concerns about place and identity with these other contemporary theoretical trends.

It would have been interesting for Grasseni to compare her work with that of Sarah Franklin (e.g. 2007) and others working on genetics and animal breeding in anthropology and science and technology studies, but this is a minor omission in an otherwise impressive ethnography. There are a few frustrating bibliographical errors in the text (for example, the oft-cited “Ingold 1993c” does not appear in the bibliography); whether such omissions are the fault of the author, or of publishers’ increasing laxity in copy editing is another matter. Overall, Berghahn is to be commended for its series on “European Anthropology in Translation.” If *Skilled Vision* is a representative example, I will be eagerly awaiting its forthcoming volumes.

References

Franklin, Sarah. 2007. *Dolly Mixtures: The Remaking of Genealogy*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press.

Paxson, Heather. 2008. Post-Pasteurian Cultures: The Microbiopolitics of Raw Milk Cheese in the U.S. *Cultural Anthropology*. 23(1):15-47.