Visualising learning practices. What is camera ethnography?

The publication at hand documents scenes recorded during a camera-ethnographic study undertaken by Bina Elisabeth Mohn in 2014 and 2015 within the framework of the project CHILD — Children in the Luxembourgean Day Care System. The results of this study can be viewed on the double DVD, Children Navigating Borders – Transition Practises in Day Care Routine (Mohn & Bollig 2015). The pictures presented here are video stills culled from the films on the DVD. In this respect, this publication is also a result of camera-ethnographic research. But what are the procedures and benefits of "camera ethnography"?

Camera ethnography, a new method of research, has distinguished itself over the last ten years by proposing a showing ethnography (see Mohn 2013). It shares basic premises of ethnographic research, which examines how specific social groups create "their everyday world" through their routine practices. Ethnographers, therefore, must literally go "into the field" and participate in the everyday routines they study ("participant observation"). The goal and yield of this form of observation are "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1983/1987) of these everyday worlds, descriptions which unfold the respective topic of study via the concretely witnessed situations and respective logic of action. While the writing ethnographer performs his or her field research using notebooks and writing implements, filming ethnographers reach for the camera; ergo, camera ethnography yields visual studies, not texts.

The term "camera-stylo" (Astruc 1964) indicates the camera’s intended form of use: a visual "notation" of that which draws the attention of the participating researcher and, likewise, is consciously given attention during the ethnographic observation. In camera ethnography, cinematography and film editing are put to the service of the ethnographic eye and visual work. A "thick depiction" is the goal—"thick" as an exploratory habitus towards understanding, and in contrast to the "shallow" reproduction of surfaces. Concrete actions and routines reveal their meaning or become understandable only within the cultural or situational framework in which they take place. To carve out this reflexivity of practice is the quest of "thick description" and "thick showing". How are camera-ethnographic observations and analyses generated, and how can they be used? And what qualifies them as a "school of seeing"?

Camera ethnography is a visual, body- and space-oriented method. It enables us to bring even "silent" practises into the picture for study and investigation. This was taken advantage of in a targeted manner during the CHILD project so as to get a view of the physical and material practises of children from the ages of 2 to 4. Camera-ethnographic research, by means of filming and thick showing, voices a question and also an analytical interest and sensitivity for the situational, the ephemeral, the apparently unimportant, and that which is simply overlooked or faded out by the professional interests involved in the development of children. In the case of this camera-ethnographic study this meant
to ask and explore, at the margins and points of transition in everyday day care, how children master their everyday routines.

Observe and take pictures

Camera-ethnographic film material or pictures cannot simply be collected like an already existing field document or be taped like a copy of the situation. Neither are specific times (e.g., breakfast or lessons) nor locations (day care facilities, for example) or people (e.g., children) simply “caught on film.” Camera ethnography—not unlike “notebook ethnography”—involves and uses the personal presence as well as the perception and depiction skills of the ethnographer(s).

To participate in a situation and conduct ethnographic observations with a camera requires suitable gazes to advance. From where do I look, and to where? Where do I place myself within the environment, and my research within this field? Camera ethnographers circulate, camera in hand, within the situations they are researching and pursue both the observable practices as well as the research questions that arise. The formulation of "how questions" engenders a camera work which, by means of visual vistas and gaze cut paths, follows up on these very questions. The results are focussed audiovisual observational notes—notations of gazes and images by ethnographic authors. They reveal something about both the ethnographer’s searching eye as well as the events witnessed on location. For this reason, camera-ethnographic pictorial material differentiates itself: (1) from the actual situation that was occurring when it was created; (2) from that what participants of the situation have to say about their own activity; and (3) not least from that which the researchers already knew in advance.

Within the context of a visual analytic as proposed by camera ethnography, the image-producing procedures are what make the observed visible in the first place and transfer it into a thick depiction. Camera work, film editing, the generation of still images or the search for words all serve as epistemic tools. Camera ethnography replaces the separation of data collection, data preparation, and analysis with a continual analytical process of visualisation in which a theory-guided learning to see, and being able to show, are always visually manifested.

Whether something can even become the object of ethnographic study is based not least upon working, during the research process, on the perceptibility, observability, and visibility of that which is being researched.

Asking instead of knowing

How do children shape their spatial transitions? And their temporal? How do they configure the transitions into the collective? The filmed scenes of children's horizontal transition practices during day care are questioned, reduced and condensed by means of analytical perspectives. To answer research questions regarding the material,
metaphors come into play. They seek close proximity to the investigated phenomena while simultaneously establishing the distance required for theorisation. During the observation of practises in the hallway, for example, the hallway became a "race track", "snack bar", or "customs station"... The unknown is discovered by means of familiar constructs (see Fleck 1983/1947). The unique potential of camera ethnography, when it comes to researching the practises of small children, lies in the constant movement back and forth between looking and showing, talking, writing and questioning, and getting deeply immersed within the realm of that which isn't yet, isn't, or is no longer linguistic (see Mohn 2010).

Editing and montage allows for differently focussed configurations of the visual material: scenes are fragmentated, taken apart and sorted, arranged and rearranged, commented and assembled. This is not for the translation of analysis results, but to produce the analysis. In the constructive processing of the material the analytical procedures allow for the identification and differentiation of the children's practises as well as for putting them into context and revealing their variety as situated practises.

**Creation and interchange of gazes (?)**

The camera-ethnographic scenes of this "school of learning" arise from an analytical question: *To what extent and in what way is the day care routine of children a learning context?*

The arrangement of the images pursues this question by way of typical transitions occurring throughout the day, those that arise when coming and going, when arriving and staying, when moving from one learning and care facility to the next. The focused research interest in the care situation of the child, as a station in his or her routine living environment, reveals in the end that without a contribution of the children, the everyday day care routine would not work. The positioning of the ethnographic gaze reflected within the framework of the camera-ethnographic research establishes a specific view and display: here, in this brochure, it is the child-centred, non-pedagogical view of the CHILD project, that is suggested and implemented by the still images and their condensed arrangement.

The results of a camera-ethnographic research can be presented and viewed in a variety of ways (e.g., in the form of film screenings, printed pictorial sequences, or as a walk-through media installations). Studies that lean more towards transporting knowledge by pictures than words initialise perception and response contexts that remain, to a certain extent, both open and indefinite. The same is true of camera ethnography: the pictorially recorded gaze at children's practises engenders us to attempt and exchange further gazes. Focussed video scenes and pictorial sequences enable observation and further questioning, describing and continued thought. This reveals the processual character of camera-ethnographic studies: the reception becomes a stage within a circular research and the audience itself gets involved in the process of designation and interpretation. If
enough new questions are raised and possible alternative objects of focus developed, an in-depth video study can be executed, one which will also remain true to the goal: ethnography leads to a more-complex point of view and, at the same time, to even better questions. In this respect, research does not lead to a simplification of the world, but rather expands the horizons of that which is perceivable.