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Film Review

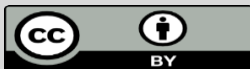
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Review of Daniels, Inge. *She Waves at Me*. Oxford: Disobedient Buildings Project. 2022. 20 minutes, 41 seconds

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An older woman works on her small balcony garden. The camera focuses on her hands, as she picks through bits of broken ceramic. Suddenly, her attention is pulled elsewhere – to the sounds of children playing in the distance. Looking out from her balcony toward somewhere beyond the frame, she stands still, seemingly enthralled by what she hears. This is a scene from Inge Daniels' visually striking film, *She Waves at Me*, which invites viewers to pay attention to often-overlooked moments and objects in the daily lives of older adults and the aging buildings in which they live, amidst conditions of decay and decline.

I first watched *She Waves at Me* at the inaugural webinar on images, aging, and care.¹ During this event, Daniels introduced the film by describing its backstory and sharing some details about the production process. I'm including some of the 'behind the scenes' story that Daniels told at the webinar in this review because this may be instructive for scholars interested in the process of ethnographic filmmaking and adds another layer of interest to scholars of aging. The ethnography from which the film draws is part of the [Disobedient Buildings project](#), a multi-disciplinary, multi-sited research project about housing, welfare, and well-being, for which Daniels, a visual anthropologist and anthropology professor at the University of Oxford, is a primary investigator.² Making the film, however, was a COVID project, Daniels explained, and her first foray into the study of aging.

The setting of the film is the Barbican Estate in central London, where Daniels lives. An example of brutalist British architecture, The Barbican is structurally and conceptually impressive and the film includes many images of its buildings, ponds, and grounds. All the shots in the film are stationary. Daniels explained that this was because of her novice filmmaking skills. With no prior experience or training, she simply set up her iPhone on a tripod for many of the shots. I found this filming technique anything but a limitation, however. The wide, still frames put viewers in the same position as Daniels: we see what she saw, from the same distance, as if we are looking out of her apartment window ourselves (many shots were indeed taken from her apartment window due to COVID restrictions). Further, her DIY method, though inadvertent, aligns with a recent call for multimodal anthropology to reject professional aesthetics in exchange for more inclusive, low-barrier approaches to filmmaking as ethnography (Epp 2024).

The film doesn't follow a narrative arc but is instead made up of fragments of daily life and conversations between Daniels and her three participants, who viewers rarely, if ever see. The two women only granted permission to Daniels towards the end of filming to include minimal views of their faces; instead, their hands and feet are featured throughout the film. The third protagonist, a man named

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John, did not want to be shown at all, yet his daily life and the stories he tells are featured throughout the film. As Daniels shared in the webinar, “he made the film for me.” She explained that John was in his nineties at the time of filming and the primary caregiver for his wife. When outside help came to give him respite, he took that time to walk the grounds of the Barbican. Daniels accompanied him on many of these walks. “He was in lockdown before there was lockdown,” Daniels said, referring to his limited freedom as a caregiver.

It is maybe exactly the spatial and temporal limitations of John’s life that make him so attuned to often unrecognized dramas of everyday life. One scene shows a maintenance worker moving along slowly with a large machine across the frame. Concurrently, John is speaking to Daniels on one of their walks about a beetle they’re watching: “he doesn’t bother about obstructions. He goes around them and over them. Amazing, isn’t it? Absolutely amazing. Where’s he going and what’s he doing?” [3:29]. Daniels invites viewers to observe daily life at the Barbican with the same attention by which John wonders at the small life of a beetle. Sitting with the same frame for ten seconds or more, viewers can look closer at the minutiae of everyday life: workers chipping away paint from cement walls; moss growing on concrete; a duck pecking at a COVID mask; wilted rose petals floating in a pond; a gardener mowing a lawn; that same gardener sauntering after the landscaping bags that have blown away in a gust of wind.

Daniels’ attention to details was perhaps a consequence of the extraordinary COVID times she was filming in. Yet, the film captures a common experience of growing old – that as the geographic scope of an individual’s life becomes smaller, due to decreased abilities, their immediate surroundings increase in significance (Rowles 1978). While the film features and indeed celebrates ordinary moments in aging lives, Daniels balances this with the realities of aging that create such conditions in which small moments gain importance. Through the stories John tells about daily goings on at The Barbican, it is evident that these ordinary events are meaningful to him. Yet, at the same time, we see another side of his life through the hospital-like equipment in his apartment and as he speaks about his wife and her decreasing ability to communicate. We are reminded that what has made the time and space for John to marvel at the small things is loss. “She waves at me at times” [12:02], he says of his wife, a comment about a simple gesture that carried such weight it inspired the title of Daniels’ film. “But it’s, um...,” he tries to continue, but then trails off, seemingly unsure how, or unable, to find any more words. For John, a wave, such an ordinary action, is loaded with contradictory meaning, signifying both what is lost, but also what remains of his wife’s ability to communicate with him.

Daniels asks viewers to see complexity in contexts of decay and decline, of aging buildings and aging bodies, as more than static end points with no meaning. Decay portrayed around the Barbican throughout the film – eroding paint on a railing, brown leaves stuck in a drain, dead reeds in a pond – prompt daily attention by maintenance workers. Declining health and abilities of the older adults in Daniels’ film has meant similar kinds of active attention: wheelchairs, walking canes, and hospital beds become central features of apartment décor; the simple act of walking up and down stairs now a well-thought-out process with fingers that don’t bend; room is made on shelves for containers holding the ashes of loved ones. The effects of the passing of time, on people and their environments, are mirrored and juxtaposed, so that viewers encounter these as almost mutually constituting situations, each requiring care and attention.

As John describes his life at the Barbican, “there is always something going on” [13:22]. Similarly, there is so much going on in this film, so many themes that can be explored within the juxtaposition of images, and the messages found between the lines of the voices speaking over and paired with the images. But that seems to be the point. The film’s imagistic quality (Mattingly and Grøn 2022) – the way it subtly

draws viewers into that which is overlooked or unspoken – allows viewers to come to their own conclusions about the daily entanglements of aging people and the buildings in which they live. So, I invite readers to watch the film – and then watch it again and maybe again – because the longer you pay attention, the more you will see.

Notes

1. This event was organized jointly by the Association for Anthropology, Gerontology and the Life Course (AAGE), the Care and Images Collective, the European Association of Social Anthropologists' Age and Generations Network (AgeNet), and the Network for Visual Anthropology of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (VANEASA).

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