

Cooperation and Difference. Camera Ethnography in the Research Project 'Early Childhood and Smartphone'

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Abstract

The article examines the fundamental role of cooperation and difference in ethnographic research. We use *camera ethnography* in our research project Bo5 "Early Childhood and Smartphone. Family Interaction Order, Learning Processes and Cooperation" to reveal the iconographic aspects of media practices and to examine their choreographies in space and time. This enables us to engage with aspects such as embodiment, materiality, and perception in early childhood and learning. Rather than using video technology to produce recordings of a 'reality' assumed to be simply there and filmable, a key methodological premise of camera ethnography is that the visibility of an object of research is not given a priori but has to be generated by media ethnographic research practices. Hence, ethnographic research practices are epistemic practices and constitute "epistemic things" (see Rheinberger 2006; Knorr-Cetina 1999). To discover and investigate media practices in early childhood involves building, shaping, and maintaining relationships of cooperation and difference.

1. Introduction

This contribution introduces and discusses *camera ethnography* (Mohn 2013, 2018); one of the methodologies used within the Collaborative Research Centre 'Media of Cooperation' to conduct research in the field of

media anthropology. *Camera ethnography* proposes a shift from the emphasis in ethnographic research on speech, discourse, and text-based formats to an emphasis on performative, iconographic, and cinematic formats. We use *camera ethnography* in our research project Bos “Early Childhood and Smartphone. Family Interaction Order, Learning Processes and Cooperation” within the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC/SFB) 1187 “Media of Cooperation” to reveal the iconographic aspects of media practices and to examine their choreographies in space and time. This enables us to engage with aspects such as embodiment, materiality, and perception in early childhood and learning. Rather than using video technology to produce recordings of a ‘reality’ assumed to be simply there and filmable, a key methodological premise of *camera ethnography* is that the visibility of an object of research is not given a priori but has to be generated by media ethnographic research practices. We have to fine-tune our perception and sensibility in order to discover how to make visible and achieve observability – to make it possible to see something “as something”. Hence, ethnographic research practices are epistemic practices by means of which “epistemic things” are constituted (see Rheinberger 2006; Knorr-Cetina 1999). As the boundary objects (Star/Griesemer 1989) of new knowledge, epistemic objects cannot simply be recorded with a camera. In the process of learning to see something “as something” they gradually take shape and emerge in and between the filmic images created in *camera ethnographic* research.

When they are understood as a discovery process, filming, cutting, and montage are situated and undertaken differently than they are in contexts geared towards documentation or producing records. The technical media may be the same, but the practices and processes are not. The media ethnographic research practices used in *camera ethnography* thus differ from media practices in other contexts. Hence, using media ethnographic practices to discover and investigate media practices in early childhood involves building, shaping, and maintaining relationships of cooperation and difference. Following a brief intro-

duction to our 'field', this text examines the fundamental role of cooperation and difference in camera ethnographic filming, editing, and the dissemination of results.

2. Cooperative "Sofa Ethnography"

Since 2016, our camera ethnographic research team¹ has established collaborative relationships with 14 families of different nationalities with children aged 0–6 years. We join the families for research sessions with the camera more or less regularly, as conditions (such as location) allow. Most of these sessions take place in the families' homes, partly due to the complications of filming in public spaces regarding the infringement of others' privacy. But living rooms are actually a very good place to start when it comes to studying media practices in early childhood. Pointing a camera at a person, no matter how small they are, is always about negotiating consent. Inviting camera ethnographers into one's home and showing oneself as a parent, family member, or child; allowing images of one's own living room to be made public – such activities mean relinquishing one's own privacy. At this point, our research both instigates and becomes incorporated into practices of "doing public". A special kind of participatory research relationship develops as researchers and parents talk to each other, collaborate to plan their meetings, and consider potential activities or situations of interest. Sometimes this results in scenes reminiscent of improvisational theatre workshops: the initial action may be partly 'staged', but then develop in unexpected ways. In these sessions, we examine how 0–6 year-old children participate in the media practices of their families: we focus on face to face and face to screen constellations; on ways of looking, listening, and touching; we pay attention to how children learn to see themselves and to position themselves in relation to others; to how the development of self-awareness and the creation of a public self evolve hand in hand; to how family members, including children, make themselves present and absent across space and time; to how children dis-

cover their world and the things in it; and how they appropriate, investigate, and begin to utilise analogue and digital media. These are the foci of our long-term study, which breaks new ground with its ethnographic observation of the media practices of a generation that can now watch themselves growing up with the aid of digital media from the very start of their lives. As part of this collaborative process, we share the films we produce with the families involved, who in turn contribute their own photographs and films to enrich our research.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

In Figure 1, father and daughter watch a family video (shown right) together. The family video was later incorporated into the three-channel installation “Face to Face – Face to Screen”² (Hare/Mohn/Vogelpohl 2018a), shown in Figure 2. Publishing and presenting our research findings as films, video installations, illustrated texts, or photo essays would not be possible without the trust and cooperation of our participating families. This shows their willingness to contribute an important perspective on a controversial and pressing topic. The use of digital media by children and in families is all too often demonised in public debates that are reduced to hasty warnings of the dangers of addiction or “digital dementia” (Spitzer 2012). The ‘Early Childhood and Smartphone’ project offers alternative narratives by taking a step back from such sensationalism to study, ethnographically, how families actually use digital media in everyday life, and how children actually grow up in the digitalised world.

3. Situated within a Research Process

The dynamics of knowing/not-knowing and seeing/not-yet-being-able-to-see can be used constructively in the research process by developing a self-reflexive approach to ethnographic research. Fieldwork and laboratory phases, publication and reception phases, as well as application and reflection phases are undertaken at intervals, not necessarily in a set order. Rather than distinguishing separate phases of data collection and interpretation, *camera ethnography* is conceptualised as a continuous process of finding perspectives and viewpoints and using filmic techniques to work on visibility and seeing.

Fieldwork phases:	camera perspectives (“ <i>Blickschneisen</i> ”)
Laboratory phases:	experimental arrangements
Publication phases:	rhetorics of presentation
Reception phases:	experiencing ways of viewing
Application phases:	society as a laboratory
Reflexive phases:	rethinking methodology

These six phases can each be seen as research situations that are characterised by particular kinds of challenges. Hence, ethnographic research practices are – like the practices they study – *situated practices*. They are characterised by their respective position within the research process. Aims and practices when filming, for example, might be to achieve concentration on a certain element, when editing it may be about furthering an experimental exploration. Publication requires taking a particular stance or position, and reception should open dialogue and debate. Fields of application may be shaped and researched anew, on other occasions it may be appropriate to reflect on one's own methodology and how it could be improved (see Mohn 2002 [2016], 2011). Such considerations form the basis of a “situated methodology” (see Mohn 2013: 186). The present text focuses on cooperation and difference in relation to camerawork, cutting, and montage, and the reception of an ethnography that *shows rather than tells*.

4. Difference (and Cooperation) in Camerawork

By shifting the emphasis from discursive to performative forms of knowledge, *camera ethnography* opens up new ways of approaching research objects. Rather than giving precedence to temporal sequentiality (as transcript-based analyses do) *camera ethnography* foregrounds the spatial/iconographic aspects of practices and their choreographies in time and space. In *camera ethnographic* research, filming neither precedes analysis (as the collection of ‘raw’ data) nor does it follow it (as in the illustrative filming of results). Instead, the camera perspectives chosen at the time of filming already constitute a significant part of the process of making “something” visible and observable. Effective research with the camera requires an ethnographer to “look” rather than “see”, and to “point” interestedly rather than “show” what is supposedly already “known” (cf. Streeck 2017). “Looking, seeing, and knowing” (cf. Fleck 1983; authors’ translation) is about shaping a process of discovery. Key to this not-yet-knowing but nonetheless directed use of the cam-

era is the formulation of “how” questions, for example, “how is ‘remembering’ – or negotiating, operating, investigating... – done with digital media in early childhood?” Choosing and varying camera perspectives (“Blickschneisen”, Mohn 2013) while filming allows a developing interest in “something” to gradually take shape and become more distinct. This is what ultimately makes it possible to “see” and “show” what has been discovered. The video stills in this contribution from the project ‘Early Childhood and Smartphone’ show a range of camera perspectives taken while filming, which were carefully selected in accordance with emerging ethnographic “how” questions. Choosing the video stills on a frame by frame basis already represents a further step towards analytical thickness; absolving them of their soundtrack and temporality foregrounds the iconography and socio-materiality of media practices in early childhood.

In the videos they have been taken from, images like those in Figures 3–5 are accompanied by parents’ voices saying “Look, that’s you!” In Figure 3, the camera frames the child facing his mediatised representation. This kind of “double figure” emerges as a recurrent phenomenon of early childhood with media: once one such figure has been identified, further examples are discovered, which are related to research questions like: How do children practise seeing and recognising themselves – immediately and later? How do they position themselves in relation to others and to themselves? How are data practices and practices of (self-)identification interrelated?

How do the embodied self and the latently public, visible, and communicable self-as-image engage with one another? The formulation and further specification of differentiating questions like these is driven by ethnographers’ engagement with difference as it emerges visually in the process of filming and editing.

In Figure 5, the ethnographer’s precise framing of smartphone, mother, and child reveals the shape of a triangle. The protagonists’ eye-lines converge where they meet the phone’s display, which beams the



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

faces back as a live image. The mother's bent arm stabilises the point of the triangle as the smartphone and faces appear to take turns in positioning themselves for each another: a magical triangle of seeing and showing. What makes this one more magical than other triangular forms that we begin to discover in further socio-material constellations of 'smartphone, child, and other person(s)'?



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

The triangle in Figure 6 is more complex: the eyelines do not meet at the smartphone's display. A video is being shot: the leading character is positioned centre stage and animated to act. Each point of the triangle plays a different role: baby as protagonist, one uncle as animateur, the other as documentarist. The ethnographer views the scene through her camera from another position, adding a third dimension to cre-



Fig. 7

ate a pyramid that encompasses the image-making of researcher and researched.

Communication between family members across continents used to involve waiting for weeks for letters to arrive. Video calling appears to have rendered geographical boundaries obsolete: now everyone can interact with no more than seconds between the dispatch and receipt of signals. But the people and objects made visibly and audibly present by communication technology remain physically out of reach: untouchable. How do people deal with this? How is “being there and not being there” done by children and adults?

One strategy is “show me”. Video calling brings forth practices, such as showing, that enable exchanges of give and take where physical contact is not possible. At the same time, video calling imposes framings that need to be recognised and responded to. Multiple triangles emerge in Figure 7 as objects, persons, and gazes are arranged for the screen and webcam. The ethnographers ask further differentiating questions: How do children and other participants establish and intensify contact in face to face and face to screen encounters?



Fig. 8

Figure 8, left: A child with his mother during a video call with his grandmother. Right: the same child sits with his grandmother on a Hollywood swing. In both encounters, bodies are the focus of attention. On the Hollywood swing, the child caresses and hugs his grandmother; when he becomes too forceful he is gently reminded to take care. Via video call, they work together to find noses and eyes: pointing at all the faces in the room, including that of the child himself, his mother, the filming ethnographer, and the grandmother on the phone's display – held in place by the mother. These are scenes of feeling, experiencing, learning. To what extent can 'researching' and 'learning' both be understood as cooperative media practices, what do they have in common and how do they differ? What characterises the everyday practices of families and research teams? What directs the selection and variation of ethnographic camera perspectives that are made as action unfolds? Each act of filming is situated within the overall research process: each camera ethnographer is an individual, subjective person but at the same time a member of disciplinary collectives and fields as a researcher. Ethnographic image-making is thus the result of a synthesis of unpredictable occurrences in the 'field' (or living room) with the specific foci and theoretical framings of a research project. Key to achieving such a synthesis is the ethnographer's sensitivity and reflexive approach to difference.

Figure 9 offers one last example to show the constitutive role of camerawork in *camera ethnographic* research. Consuming entertain-



Fig. 9

ment media together arranges families into differently shaped constellations. Here, “listening together” becomes visible in the wandering gazes that do not converge at an illuminated display. The soundtrack is a fairy tale played from a vinyl record. Seeking a triangle here is fruitful in a surprising way: rather than eyelines that meet, we find three momentary vanishing points. Without a visual medium to entice them into a frame, the empty gazes drift aimlessly of their own accord; yet the bodies are in close physical contact. In the mute video still, the shared activity of listening as a family (cf. “doing family”) arranges bodies and eyelines in a very different way than watching does. By choosing and varying framings and perspectives in response to both the situation at hand and the ethnographic research focus, camera ethnographers produce (still and moving) images that reveal spatial-temporal choreographies and the iconography of practices. In this way, camerawork can make practices and phenomena perceptible and observable, and address – or perhaps first find and formulate – questions relevant to the ongoing research project. Selected and edited to create video stills and film miniatures, the results of that camerawork become the building blocks for constructive analysis in collective editing sessions.



Fig. 10

5. Engaging with Difference through Cutting and Montage

The camera ethnographic discovery process continues in the edit suite. Here, the two fundamental practices of film editing both prove productive as analytical procedures. *Cutting* is about selecting and extracting relevant sequences. As a research practice, cutting makes it possible to isolate different practices, find out how they vary, and discover their situated contexts while reviewing, cutting, and sorting the material. *Montage* allows cut elements to be juxtaposed and combined. As a research practice, montage facilitates the identification and trying out of possible interrelations and contrasts, and the exploration of congruence or difference. Neither cutting nor montage are undertaken in order to illustrate the results of analyses; they are analytical processes themselves. In Figure 10, we use montage to place film fragments alongside each other instead of arranging them consecutively (see Farocki 2004). The result invites viewers – including the research team – to examine differently situated ways of “watching”.

In Figure 10, the earnestness and intensity of the children’s “watching”, together with a research interest in nonverbal practices like “looking”, “watching”, and “observing” led the respective camera ethnographers to choose framings that reveal the tiniest movements of captivated faces. The video material was then cut to produce short, condensed versions. These could then be juxtaposed with other fragments to make trial comparisons possible. The three stills shown are from film fragments that were later included within the three-channel installation *Face to Face – Face to Screen*. Arranging these film fragments along-

side one another and presenting them simultaneously (shown here as three still images) makes it possible to observe and show (cf. Wiesemann/Amann 2019) the diversity of ways in which “watching” can be situated and done as a media practice in early childhood.

Short Forms

The idea to use the ‘short form’ as a research format is in line with the trend of everyday digital communication formats to become ever shorter, more iconographic, and easily shareable. Moreover, it proves to be a cooperative format: not only can short film fragments be brought into cooperative relationships with one another, short forms also enable teams of researchers to each contribute their own work in the form of observational film fragments, miniatures, and still images for collaborative compilation, ordering, and arranging. One source of inspiration for our use of the short form has been Alexander Kluge, who proposes that “minute films” are a format suited to contemporary times, which can be combined to construct much longer arrangements. We have also been inspired by Harun Farocki’s experimentation with “soft” and parallel montage in video installations.³

Concisely packed into short forms, video observations of situated practices can be set in specific relation to differently situated practices by arranging them alongside one another in space and/or consecutively in time. This makes it possible to directly differentiate, compare, and contrast practices. The investigation of situations and their practices thus becomes a study of practices and how they are situated. Working together as a team of camera ethnographic researchers, we use editing techniques experimentally as research tools. We cut material to concentrate on specific foci and identify certain practices, and we arrange film fragments analytically to create further observability, comparability, or contrast, and to find out possible interrelations. Figures 11–14 show some further examples from the three-channel video installation “Face to Face – Face to Screen”.

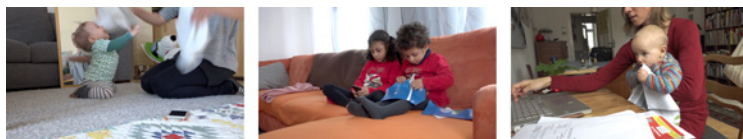


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

At the margins of digital and other cooperative (media) practices, materials such as paper creep in as rivals and fellow players. Paper can be mobilised and reshaped while other family members use laptops and smartphones – or set them aside to join the experiment. Materiality becomes tangible when a roll of kitchen towels is taken apart, an envelope ripped into pieces, or architectural plans are investigated orally. And, as the film fragments in Figure 11 show, when paper and digital devices are brought into interaction with one another. The mother who is working on her laptop adeptly swaps the plans for a less vulnerable pen, the sister who is too concerned with her smartphone to react to her younger sister is rewarded with a shower of paper scraps.

At times, infants are kept away from digital devices, on other occasions they are allowed to take them over, which brings them even closer to the adult operating (and trying to protect) the desired smartphone. As the images in Figure 12 make clear, being together and in close physical contact – sometimes in the form of a struggle – are part and parcel of early experiences with portable digital devices. We discover that operating, sharing, and touching appear together recurrently as a bundle of practices.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The juxtaposition of the images above, all of which are concerned with “investigating”, reveals that infants investigate and appropriate all kinds of things in similar ways, regardless of whether they are ‘digital’ or not.

Painted bricks, mobile phones, and wooden spoons can all be utilised to explore the dimensionality of space: up and down, there and back, to and fro. These kinds of investigations are revealed and foregrounded by the analytical arrangement. Creating such assemblages is not only a research method by which we create observability, it also results in a presentation form with which we can invite viewers to participate in such discovery processes. As soon as the audience (as co-researchers) believe they have recognised something “as something”, they are confronted anew with a further variation or a different aspect. Watching and re-searching analytical arrangements like these, whether they are juxtaposed spatially or consecutively, or both, sparks new ways of perceiving and seeing.

6. Audience Reception and Difference

Even in the form of texts, books, films, or video installations, research results are never fixed. An integral part of the research process is reception: the performative co-construction of results within social events of textual, image-based, or filmic communication. The audience become co-authors of the ethnographic work, just as the ethnographer becomes part of the work's audience (see Hausendorf et al. 2017; Mersch 2002; Pantenburg 2006). Hence, the conventional view of results and their reception as separate realms is supplanted by one in which reception events become an integral part of the research process. This creates a perfect opportunity for ethnography and public debate to come together. As Kappelhoff and Wedel (2016; emphasis in original) point out in their introduction to their *Cinepoetics* research centre: "Films do not illustrate the reality that surrounds us—and not the world as it 'really' is, and not the way in which it is given once and for all to the individual person. Rather, they are media that make it possible for an *undefinable plurality of all possible people* to manufacture a common world, a shared sensation for the communal world."

Using video to communicate with the public is most effective when audiences are incorporated into processes of ethnographic perception, observation, and discovery. 'Reception as research' instigates practices such as observing, listening, feeling, comparing, distinguishing, naming, alienating, (inter)relating, pausing, questioning, thinking, sharing, evaluating, and communicating. As public 'laboratories of looking', exhibitions enable ethnographic knowledge to be experienced and shared. Installations in exhibition spaces allow audiences to move around, stop and pause, and move on again. Visitors can thus take different positions and view video installations from different perspectives. For the exhibition "*Das bist Du!*" *Frühe Kindheit digital*, shown in the Siegerlandmuseum, Siegen (September 2018 – January 2019), we experimented as a team with different ways of arranging film fragments alongside and one after another. The exhibition included a synchro-

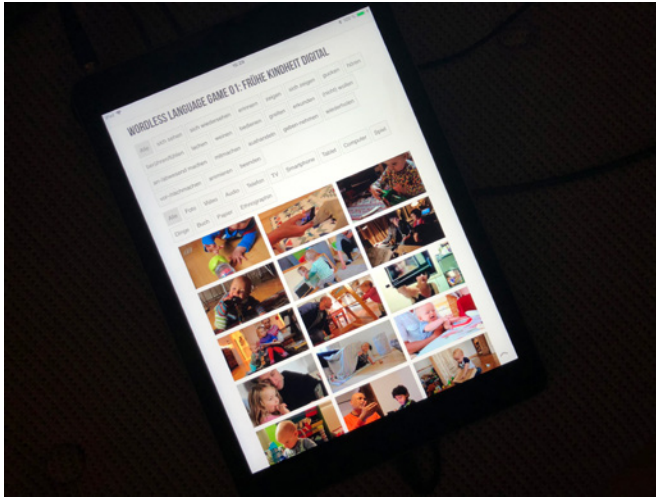


Fig. 15

nised three-channel video installation, a two-channel video installation with loops of different lengths, which produce ever changing juxtapositions, and an interactive video installation on tablets: *Wordless Language Game 01: Frühe Kindheit digital*, which offered 178 film fragments for exhibition visitors to sort and view (Hare/Mohn/Vogelpohl 2018b).

Wordless Language Games

Conceptualising research (at least in part) as a process of arranging rather than deduction enables a specific kind of analysis that draws on Wittgenstein's proposed "language games" ("Sprachspiele", see Wittgenstein 1949–1950: §23) and "perspicious representation" ("übersichtliche Darstellungen").⁴ Our (wordless) version of a "language game" (cf. "Werkstatt Wittgenstein wortlos", Mohn 2013) is proposed as an interactive research tool that enables researchers and 'audiences as co-researchers' alike to explore the astounding diversity of practices and



Fig. 16

their situated meanings. The *Wordless Language Game 01: Frühe Kindheit digital* (*Wordless Language Game 01: Digital Early Childhood*) offers a range of terms that can be used to filter the application's 178 film fragments according to 22 actions/practices and 13 media. Filtering enables a viewer to create individual selections and ensembles of film fragments according to specific interests. These can then be watched and studied. The filter terms function as heuristic tools that can be used to establish intersections of doings, devices, and research interests that may help one to become aware, compare, discover, name, and better understand the diverse cooperative practices featured in the film fragments. Yet, despite functioning as heuristic terms, they are never sufficient literally: the closer one looks, the less distinct the terms appear in comparison to the (mostly non-verbal) practices that they attempt to encapsulate. For example, "laughing" in one moment might seem incomparable with another instance of "laughing", while the different possible ways of "negotiating" prove innumerable. This realisation is reminiscent of



Fig. 17

the examples Geertz draws upon to develop the notion of “thick description” (Geertz 1973: 10f).

A “Wordless Language Game” inspires descriptive word-generating processes and calls upon those that ‘play’ it to look, to verbalise and to write, to discuss and to discover, in order to discern how similar doings undertaken in differently situated contexts can reveal themselves to be far more complex and diverse than they seemed at first glance. (Figures 15 and 16)

Such *camera ethnographic* arrangements have net-like structures that can be expanded, with interconnections that are modifiable. They do not attempt to reconstruct the order of a situation. Instead, ordering and arranging become research practices that generate and choreograph the constitutive differences and interrelations of a “perspicious representation” as proposed by Wittgenstein.

Our first “Wordless Language Game” deals with early childhood and media. Following Wittgenstein, that frame could be opened up to seek out and explore practices and their interrelations in far more diverse contexts. The fundamental question underlying such assemblages would be: “How are certain practices done – or even how *could* they be done – differently (elsewhere)?” Asking this simple question opens potential for camera ethnographic research to further explore and expand upon minimal and maximal contrasts, for example, by comparing

different age ranges, vocational or technological fields, geopolitical regions, lifeworlds or historical eras. This would mean using montage to place situated practices alongside extremely differently situated ones, as in the arrangement of two video stills in Figure 17, which juxtaposes triangular socio-material constellations of viewing in two obviously differing contexts.

7. Conclusion

As we have shown, we seek out difference and also instigate differentiation. Difference is a constitutive and indispensable feature of ethnographic research, which is used productively in *camera ethnography*.⁵ This also affects the kinds of roles played by ethnographers as they engage and cooperate with research participants and audiences. As ethnographers, we switch between multiple roles, including those of learners, strangers, guests, friends, experimenters, observers, explorers, members of scientific disciplines and collectives, filmmakers, writers, philosophers, or teachers.

The issue of difference in cooperative ethnographic research will continue to shape our ongoing *camera ethnographic* work. The video installations presented in the exhibition “*Das bist Du!*” *Frühe Kindheit digital* that have been cited in this text represent variants from a wider range of possibilities: placing one particular observational fragment next to or after another inspires a viewer of the analytically structured result to discover, compare, and combine; discerning similarities, differences, and interrelations that only become visible within the arrangement. When the filmic results of *camera ethnographic* research are publicly shared, audiences contribute further perspectives and yet other ways of seeing.

Notes

- 1 Since 2016, Bina Mohn, Pip Hare, and Astrid Vogelpohl have been working together as a team to conduct camera ethnographic research within the research project Bo5 (Principal Investigator Jutta Wiesemann).
- 2 The installation “Face to Face – Face to Screen” was shown within the exhibition “*Das bist Du!*” *Frühe Kindheit digital* (Hare, Mohn, Vogelpohl, and Wiesemann, Siegerlandmuseum, Siegen, September 2018 – January 2019).
- 3 See Kluge (2012) on “Minutenfilme”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=medmyVcsMdo>, from 10:30. See also Ehmann/Guerra (2017) and visit the website: <http://www.eine-einstellung-zur-arbeit.net/de/filme/> (Harun Farocki GbR 2012 – 2017) to sort and view short single-take films that address the topic of work.
- 4 “Übersichtliche Darstellung” has been variously translated as, among others, “surveyable representation”, “perspicious representation”, or “synoptic view”. We follow “perspicious representation” (Savickey 2014: 99–123, 2017). See also Majetschak (2016: 65–80).
- 5 For further publications relating to *camera ethnography* see <http://www.kamera-ethnographie.de>.

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