

Geography, film and exploration: women and amateur filmmaking in the Himalayas

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Film has become a cutting-edge research area and pedagogical tool for geographers (Cresswell and Dixon 2002), a trend that is morphing into a renewed interest in how we might make use of new video technologies (Garrett 2011; Laurier *et al.* 2008; Simpson 2011).¹ The literature suggests, following arguments made in visual anthropology (Pink 2007) and visual sociology (Brown *et al.* 2008; Iedema *et al.* 2006), that increasingly user-friendly digital technology can be deployed in the field as a recording device with significant implications for the production, analysis and dissemination of research. This novel methodological zeal is tempered, however, by questions that are being asked about the direction of the gaze and framing of the camera (Crang 1997), who is wielding it (Kindon 2003), what we consider to be a 'professional' film worthy of analysis, and to what degree we should 'trust' footage as a record of events 'in the field' (Clancy 2001).

Such discussions on the politics of geographic practice and filmmaking are brought to life through the life and work of Eileen Healey, a visionary British female mountaineer and amateur filmmaker (Plate 1). Healey died at the age of 89 on 8 September 2010. Over 50 years earlier, in 1959, Healey joined 10 women with the objective of reaching the 26 906-foot summit of Cho Oyu, the world's sixth highest peak, to undertake what the women and media branded as its first 'all-female' ascent, despite the presence of male Sherpas on the expedition. The Cho Oyu expedition was organised by French climber and celebrated Côte D'Azur swimwear designer Claude Kogan, with the official team including members of the British Ladies Alpine Club, the Pinnacle Club and three Nepali women. The expedition ended in tragedy with the loss of four climbers, including Kogan, and two Sherpas. Although the media at the time sensationalised the events that took place, another record of the expedition existed – reels of 16 mm film brought home by Healey and stored in an attic – until Healey's son,

near the end of her life, offered to edit the footage with his mother providing the narration. The resulting film was first screened at the Kendal Mountain Festival in 2009.

We argue that Healey's resultant film traverses three important boundaries. First, while it has been quite common since the beginning of the 20th century to film these types of expeditions as a 'formal' record of male accomplishments (often for sponsoring organisations such as the Royal Geographical Society (RGS)² or the Alpine Club), we argue that amateur recordings such as Healey's remain an underutilised archival research and teaching resource for uncovering the 'unofficial' endeavours and voices of those often neglected in the history of exploration. Second, we contend from an intra- and interdisciplinary perspective that Healey's film urges geographers to redress its relative neglect of historical film in particular as a research and pedagogic tool. Geographical engagement with the medium sits in stark comparison to anthropology's long and committed engagement with documentary and ethnographic film (see Garrett 2011). And third, on a final connected point, we contend that Healey's film shows the potential for 'inexperienced' geographers with limited film experience to cross over from film analysis and criticism into production, building on those burgeoning interests outlined above.

Geographic filmmaking

...moving images have become the primary media through which we make sense of the world and the boundaries between images and that which they imagine are increasingly blurred. (Lorimer 2010, 240)

Ongoing work by scholars including Driver and Jones (2009) reveals a considerable interest amongst British geographers in utilising and analysing film, stretching back as far as the filming of the Severn Bore in 1901



Plate 1 Eileen Healey (right) with her cine-camera and Margaret Darvall (left) in the Himalayas, 1959

Source: Courtesy of Tim Healey

(Cornish 1902). In 1922, Captain John B. Noel famously filmed the first British ascent of Everest, led by Charles Granville Bruce, with high-altitude camera kit he had developed specifically for the climb. This film footage, available in the RGS-IBG Archives,³ gained renewed recognition during Driver and Jones' 'Hidden histories of exploration' exhibition in London in 2009. These recordings are now recognised as an important contribution to the history of geographical filmmaking, alongside the film footage of Shackleton's 1919 Antarctic Expedition, Scott's ill-fated 1910 Terra Nova Expedition (compiled in the newly restored British Film Institute (BFI) film *The great white silence*), Silvino's film of Hamilton Rice's 1924–5 Amazonian expedition and Hilary's 1953 *Conquest of Everest*, among others.⁴ Indeed many major geographic explorations actively sought (male) filmmakers as expedition members and geographers were a primary audience for the recordings.

Healey made her own footage on a small cine-camera handed to her by her husband in the last minutes before departure (Plate 2). Healey's proficiency with the camera proved to go far beyond technical ability. Yet in an apologetic tone in the second holding card of the film she writes 'This film was shot by Eileen Healey amateur photographer who had no previous experience of cine photography'.⁵ When we met with Healey's husband Tim, a few months after her death,

he shared with us 14 volumes of meticulous diaries, including the large Cho Oyu expedition diary, in which Healey describes the composition and planning of her shots. Despite her supposed inexperience, Healey retained 90 per cent of her initial footage in the editing process, demonstrating seemingly intuitive skills while shooting. Healey's film shows (among many others) how professional-level skills, large funding bodies and expensive equipment are not a necessity for geographic filmmaking. Indeed, anthropologists have been steadily producing high-quality films on meagre budgets for many years, often planned, shot and edited by a single person (Yorke 2005).

Noel's 1922 Everest footage included shots of expedition leaders departing in uniform, being blessed by the Head Lama of Rongbuk (a deeply political scene according to Driver and Jones (2009, 40) given British interests in maintaining access to Tibet) and crossing icy chasms. While also showing perilous bridge crossings and a range of physical risks and hazards, Healey's film equally showcases local vernacular architectures, rituals of everyday Nepalese life as experienced directly by the women, and the unwavering commitment, bravery and friendship of the Sherpas and Sherpanis; in short, the film is about the journey, not the goal.

We argue that in addition to the more formal, overtly political and marketable films produced by figures such as Noel, amateur filmmaking and associated archives provide a rich resource for geographical research. We see the analysis of archival home video such as Healey's as an overlooked trove of rich geographical storytelling (on working with home archives, see Ashmore *et al.* 2012 and on gleaning archives, see Cresswell 2012). The film holds much potential for geographic and ethnographic analysis as a snapshot of village landscapes and livelihoods, cultural exchange and cultural encounter in which the roles of the Sherpas and Sherpanis are given prominence (also see Ortner's 2001 discussion of her 1977 anthropological film project *Sherpas*).

Our call for geographers to start filming again, and to reclaim neglected voices, is in part being pursued through participatory video (Brickell 2012; Kinson 2003; Waite and Conn 2011) as a form of amateur filmmaking with communities. These, like Healey's, could both be cast 'records of marginal practices' (Zimmerman 1996, 85; emphasis in original) in which a window is opened up into 'people's private geographies and how they give meaning to the worlds they inhabit' (Nicholson 1997, 201). In this sense, amateur filmmaking potentially allows geographers to (comparatively) understand quotidian experiences of (expedition) life that do not have to be analysed through official recordings or through the lens of an often sensationalist media alone (Nicholson 2001).

Women and exploration

They had dreamed of planting a flag on the summit as a symbol of achievement – not the achievement of a nation, but of their sex. (Harper 1959a, 5)

Since the early 1990s, geographers have demonstrated a growing concern to unravel the hidden histories of women's explorations (see, for example, Domosh 1991). Note has in turn been given to women such as Mary Kingsley, who in 1895, whilst travelling in West Africa, made reference to her desire to be the first white person to ascend the highest mountain in the region (Blunt 1994; Kearns 1997; see also Maddrell 2009 on Gertude Bell mountaineering in the Alps between 1899 and 1904). Other studies (Hansen 1995; Ryan 1998) have sought in this vein to expose the active construction of masculinity at this time in relation to mountain climbing and an imagined sense of British imperial power (aspirations channelled, in part, according to Hansen (1995, 309) by the 'institutional aegis' of the Alpine Club, which opened in 1857). While debate once encircled women's capability for exploration in RGS circles of the early 1900s (Bell and McEwan 1996; Blunt 1994;



Plate 2 Waving goodbye, clockwise from bottom, Eileen Healey, Lulu Boulaz, Claude Kogan, Jeanne Franco, Claudine Van dèr Stratten, Micheline Rambaud and Colette le Bret

Source: Courtesy of Tim Healey

Maddrell 2009), it is now widely acknowledged that geography has evolved beyond its focus on exploration and mapping as the endeavour of men alone (Gilmartin 1990). Despite this, an emphasis on masculinity in the gender politics of high-altitude mountaineering 'has meant that feminist studies of women climbers and women-centred expeditions are still rare' (Rak 2007, 115; see also Frohlick 2004; Mazel 1994).⁶

Promoting the study of these women and their expeditions, we argue that the discourse surrounding the climb to Cho Oyu brings into filmic view the continuing construction of mountain climbing as a masculine pursuit and the subsequent struggles for representation that the 1959 team negotiated. Throughout the film Healey gives note to the spectacle of the 'strange women mountaineers' that villagers 'had never seen before'. While not directly acknowledged in the film, the theme of struggle is most vividly played out in the decision made by the team to exclude *Daily Express* journalist Stephen Harper from accompanying them between Kathmandu and the summit in an effort to maintain an 'all-female expedition'. This achievement is noted in the title card to Healey's film where it is written '1st Cho Oyu International All Women's Expedition 1959'. Despite the newspaper, along with *Paris-Match*, providing their sponsorship, communication was maintained remotely via daily diaries with the duplicate onionskin copies sent back to Harper in the capital. This did not stop Harper writing in his first book, *Lady killer peak* (1962), that the drama that unfolded 'is told here by the only man to share the women's adventures' (with the tag line, '1 man, 11 girls, 1 mountain' repeated in a number of his newspaper articles, see Harper 1959b). As Eileen Healey writes in the foreword to Harper's second book on the expedition, *A fatal obsession*,

it is possible that the leader [Claude] herself wanted to avoid any accusation that the expedition was relying on men, though in fact this was a difficult thing to sustain in view of the role of Sherpas and porters. (2007, ix)

The film therefore displays a tension between its opening gambit of being an 'all women's' expedition versus Healey's acknowledgement in the footage of the Sherpas' central role in their endeavours (for further discussion over the politics of acknowledging men in the 'independent' travel of women, see Blunt 1994; Driver and Jones 2009).

Kogan's apparent concern for feminist politics, her desire to show that women from around the world could work as a team and be more resilient to high altitude and extreme cold than men, lay in contrast to Healey's more pragmatic stance at the time that 'climbing was my great hobby ... I didn't care who helped us' (Douglas 2010, 78). Indeed, as *The Times* obituary reports, although the expedition was declared by members 'to be a challenge to international womanhood' this 'was not a view shared

by Healey who was never a firebrand campaigner for women's rights' (2010, 78). Indeed, the film privileges 'insider' tender moments of commonality akin to a visual field diary, the women brushing and cutting each other's hair, picking flowers and commending the selection of chic yet practical mountaineering outfits (particularly those of Van der Stratten). The film possesses what could be cast as stereotypically 'feminine attributes' associated with the private realm (emotion, love and care) focusing in large part on the experiences of local guides, domestic issues and emotional engagements of the trip. These domestic intimacies of mountaineering life also extended to the male Sherpas, who Healey captures scrubbing clothes in the river, washing up and cooking steaks from the 'faithful yak'. Thus, the expedition, as seen through the eyes of Healey, was a rare filmic document not necessarily edited for flashy highlights but everyday life, filmed in a way that speaks very much to contemporary interests in geography. Indeed, the taken-for-granted, mundane and routine activities of women's lives have long been central to the production of knowledge in feminist geography (Dyck 2005), and in this case, to the production of knowledge far beyond the spheres of everyday life.

Healey does nevertheless blur the common historical distinction highlighted by Blunt of the 'professionalization of male travel in contrast to the personalisation of female travel' (1994, 65). Healey emphasises through her narration of their journey the enormous experience of each individual climber, many of whom were expert climbers in the European Alps and accomplished skiers. This note given to the women's skills also extends to their professional lives with Healey celebrating more than once in the film the skills of le Bret, a doctor, who is pictured holding clinics for locals from Namche Bazaar, the 'Sherpa's home', and who extracts the tooth of a Sherpa at base camp. Kogan is also shown as very much in control, counting money, checking porters and tasked with catching and preserving specimens of butterflies at the request of a naturalist. Such observations are not limited to the female climbers alone, but also to the Sherpanis, whom Healey identifies as carrying loads just as heavy as those carried by their male counterparts. In sum then, Healey's efforts promote film as an important historical scholarly resource for unravelling 'hidden histories of exploration' (Driver and Jones 2009) furthering established research on women's travel writing (Blunt 1994; Kearns 1997).

The future of amateur filmmaking and geographic practice

In the context of this Boundary Crossing piece, Healey's film should be seen as a springboard for multiple future geographies. First, such future geographies include uncovering the largely untapped 'official' film

archives at the Alpine Club, the BFI and the RGS-IBG, encompassing 100 years of history, at the same time as searching out amateur footage (as we did through Healey's newspaper obituary), (re-)appraisals of which we hope will bring into view the lives of those who have often remained just out of frame. This need for large-scale gleaning of historical archives (both professional and amateur), we contend, is doubly important given its potential to inform contemporary practice, illuminating how and why changing technologies of film have been used, and to what effect, ethically, methodologically and in respect to the production of different geographical knowledges. The second main point we want to make is that whilst a growing number of scholars are facilitating the output of film through participatory video, we urge geographers to additionally engage directly in filmmaking itself. This does not have to be limited to natural environments, but could encompass human environments, thus complementing a growing body of scholarship that uses film to capture mood, flow, rhythm and change over time in cityscapes (Anton *et al.* 2012). Taking these two points together, we hope that Healey's (filmic) traversing of the mountain landscapes of the Himalayas will encourage geographers to cross creative and technical boundaries of their own.

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Notes

- 1 As well as the recent 'Moving geographies: film and video as a research method' sessions at the 2011 Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers [RGS-IBG]) annual conference.
- 2 In January 1995, the new Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) was formed (RGS-IBG). We therefore refer only to the RGS with respect to events prior to the merger.
- 3 The 1922 expedition footage can be viewed at: <http://hiddenhistories.rgs.org/index.php/gallery> Accessed 15 February 2012
- 4 All of these films can be viewed online at the BFI documentary film archive: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/446186/index.html> Accessed 15 February 2012
- 5 The Cho Oyu expedition saw an 'official' filmmaker role designated to Rambaud. The film clearly holds much (comparative) value and as a result the Alpine Club is currently trying to obtain a copy from Rambaud herself in France.
- 6 See also the ongoing doctoral work of Sarah Evans at the University of the West of England on women in the

RGS-IBG expedition archives between 1913 and 1986 and her paper 'Women's expeditions and the imagining of geography's pasts' presented at the RGS-IBG annual conference in September 2011.

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