

# Writers on writing

## On the creative ecology of words: Anand Pandian in dialogue with Thomas Yarrow

*TY: In Reel world, your recent book on the making of Indian film, you have written: 'Thinking can only happen in and among the things of the world' (2015: 15). I take it that you are referring as much to the creative process of anthropology as to that of film production. I'd be interested to know more about the creative process of your own thinking, and in particular the things amongst which your own writing happens. I'm wondering when and where you do your writing; with what media; and how or whether this affects the kinds of things you can think and write about.*

AP: I'm writing right now where I often tend to write, in a little cube near the corner of a building on a rather excessively manicured American university campus. These walls are made of cinder blocks, painted a hopeful white, and the keyboard sits on a desk composed of some mysterious brown synthetic substance. It's an unseemly brown, not ageing very well, this plastic surface. There is a window next to the desk, and I'm probably turned there more often than I should be, zoning out with things I can never quite recall, which is to say that I'm actually both here and not here when I write. I think that writing always needs this in one way or another, some relationship with an outside. This doesn't have to be literal or physical, as the image of a window might imply, but still, I think, there has to be some kind of purchase, whether in restlessness or reverie, on another world elsewhere.

This kept happening to the filmmakers I worked with on that book – there we were together, in the same place somewhere, the same room or field or scrap of

pavement, and yet they were constantly going off at that very moment to somewhere distant and inaccessible, off on a current of sound or of light or the slowly waning feeling of an imaginative vision or a voice once heard, since lost. The power of what they made, their films, seemed to turn so often on these flights, these departures from the here and now, or, more precisely, on the way that such vectors of displacement could be turned back around, channelled somehow back into the here and now, for a different and more interesting sense of the reality we shared. I think that something like this was happening to me as well, as an ethnographer, throughout those encounters, for I was never fully there wherever that was, always taking little notes myself (if not on paper then in my head), caught up in a movement between what was happening then and how that happening would yet be conveyed, dwelling like them in a spiral of time, the fieldwork moment which is always shadowed by the record it will eventually become.

What I'm trying to say is that creative process is a matter of being acted upon as much as acting on, an invitation to take in – inhale, even – energies and sensations and impulses and impressions as means of generating unforeseen ideas. To give an example, there was something that happened one morning on the way to this office a couple of years back. I was intent on writing a bit of this book, a chapter on love which turns on the kindling of cinematic affects in physical landscapes. I was walking down the trail through the forest on the edge of campus when I suddenly came to a startled halt, as there was a long, thick black snake slowly wriggling across the stones of the path. It was an electric moment – this hardly ever happens. I stopped, sort of marvelling and quaking at the same time, waiting for the snake to pass. When I began walking again, I had an eerie sense of the same writhing form in all the branches, vines, and roots I ducked around and almost tripped over. There was something else as well:

phrases were already coming together – ‘winding roots, overhanging branches, vines and stems reaching out into the air . . .’ – that would form the fulcrum of a little narrative I wrote later that day, a story that would become an essential cusp in the chapter I was writing. Looking back on that day, I think it’s worth noting that the form of what I wrote took on the very same structure of echoes and repetitions I had felt on the trail. I think this kind of thing often happens with what we do.

That sentence you cite from my book is a gloss on a line from *Difference and repetition*, by Deleuze: ‘Something in the world forces us to think’ (2004: 176). We anthropologists face this challenge in a peculiar way, as practitioners of a field science with both literary and philosophical pretensions. The particular details of empirical phenomena often rise up as stubborn obstacles in the writing and thinking we have to do; working in faithfulness to those details, while we let our thoughts dwell and steep among the things and beings of that world, can often be quite difficult. In fact, I had been stuck in writing until the encounter with that snake, unsure of how to move in that chapter between two very different concrete situations of fieldwork, somewhere in the Swiss Alps and a spot in the desert west of Dubai, both of which I knew were essential to its grammar. But I think it helps, with such impasses, to approach writing as a practice that also begins in a field, a field whose own forces, tendencies, beings, and things may have some resonance with the fields we seek to write about. I think this approach to writing in and among the stuff of the world can even be nurtured as a sensibility or a disposition, a way of investing the work with further potential. Encounters with the unexpected can become ways of working out problems in writing. As strange as this might sound, I think you can even come to a point when things begin to happen in the form of incipient stories, events unfolding as virtual narratives. Given how difficult writing can be, I think there’s some solace in this idea.

*In your book, you have written of the creative possibilities that are sometimes associated with speed, for example citing William Connolly’s remarks about the experimental and improvisational qualities associated with working quickly, and the ‘fugitive currents’ this can engender (Connolly 2002). I wonder if you could expand on this idea, in relation to your own writing. Is the ‘never fully there’ of writing something that happens particularly or peculiarly at speed? Is speed something you cultivate in any or all of your own writing?*

Well, I do have two young children, so there’s never very much time to begin with, and everything seems to happen anyway in a sleepless and muddled haze of being never fully there! Both of them, meanwhile, have this extraordinary ability to lose themselves in whatever they’re doing, completely oblivious to our desperate

pleas to hurry up. I think there’s something, though, to learn from such resistance – think of the importance of wonder to the ethos of anthropology, which leaves us so often in the situation of the child, or, at the very least, the child in the mood of wonder rather than those inevitable episodes of impatient rage. In the Cumbum Valley of South India, where I lived and worked for my dissertation and my first book (Pandian 2009), people were always talking about the dangers of acting too quickly, warning each other and themselves about the mind’s lightning speed, its perilous leaps of thought and impulse. There, maturity demanded the cultivation of patience, the capacity to see beyond the urgent tugs of the moment. This is an ideal that we know as well, and yet circumstances constantly pull otherwise. How best to work with the exigencies of this condition?

Deadlines, of course, are real. In anthropology, these can sometimes take on a kind of existential gravity, as was the case with the book I wrote with my grandfather, *Ayya’s accounts* (Pandian & Mariappan 2014), a project that was always shadowed by fears of his imminent demise. That book did appear in print a few months before his passing on at the age of 95, a reason for tremendous gratitude and relief. But there were also certain things relevant to your question that I learned in working with him and the evidence of his life. There was, for example, the idea of rhythm, of attuning oneself to the cadence most apt for a given situation. I think, for example, of the tap of Ayya’s cane as he walked each morning in the South Indian town of Madurai, which beat out a time that let him attend to potholes and other pitfalls along the road. John Dewey, the American pragmatist philosopher, describes rhythm as the germ of any aesthetic experience. ‘When there is a uniformly even flow, with no variations of intensity or speed, there is no rhythm’, he writes in *Art as experience* (Dewey 1934: 160). So then it may be less about speed as such than what happens when you modulate it.

With *Reel world* (2015), the two chapters that came most quickly were also the most unconventional in form, that chapter on speed which you’ve brought up, and another chapter on desire. Both, oddly, also had a relationship with driving. The chapter on speed came together over a couple of weeks in 2012 when I was stuck in LA, giving me the chance to juxtapose an editor’s obsession with fast cars to what I knew of this autozone where I’d grown up. It was almost like borrowing the staccato pace of the chapter from the place where I was writing it, cut to cut to cut, freeway bursts to traffic jams and all. The chapter on desire, which, as you know, unfolds as one continuous and rather delirious sentence, was written over a few days the next summer. Our basement had flooded, and instead of writing I spent a long day driving out from Baltimore to Virginia Beach and back for a truckload of

floor tiles I'd found on Craigslist. I made a playlist of all the songs from Selva's films (the director at the heart of that chapter) and played them over and over again for hours on end. I think the feeling of that day, which was also pouring with a hard summer storm, had a lot to do with the flow of that chapter, which I began to write at a nondescript roadside Starbucks somewhere in Virginia that afternoon.

I think what I'm trying to say is that I don't try to write quickly as much as to find the pace and rhythm most suitable for the circumstances that I'm trying to convey, and suitable too for those in which I find myself writing. It's a matter again of resonance, of thinking about what might be possible given the situation at hand, and working out a relationship between the possibilities of this situation and the one you're writing about. There are sentences in this book that were typed with one hand while I patted my daughter back to sleep with the other (in fact, I'm writing these sentences right now at home on a Saturday afternoon as she naps nearby, unsure of exactly how much time I still have). This may look like a compromise and a weight on intellectual freedom, but this was just how the filmmakers I worked with on this book pursued their own artistic freedom. As the director Vishnu Vardhan puts it in the chapter on time, 'What is the best I can do now? That will be running always in the mind' (Pandian 2015: 144).

*At the end of Reel world, you summarize the aim of the account as: 'an attempt to lead readers looking for arguments back to the thickets from which these arguments arise' (2015: 288). How did this aspiration frame your writing? And how does this relate to the question of audience? Do explicitly theorized arguments anticipate a different kind of reader than do the kinds of 'empirical thickets' that are centre-stage in your account?*

One reflection on writing that I find myself returning to time and again is Walter Benjamin's essay on the storyteller (Benjamin 1968). What distinguishes the story as a narrative form, Benjamin writes here, is its interpretative amplitude – half the art of storytelling, he argues, is keeping the story free from explanation, leaving to the reader the responsibility for piecing together a sense of what is happening. Although we may owe our readers more than this in anthropology, there has always been a place for this kind of narrative and interpretative amplitude in the written work of the discipline. Think of what Bronislaw Malinowski published in this journal almost exactly a century ago, that long 1916 essay on the spirits of the dead written between two rounds of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. 'In the field', Malinowski notes, 'one has to face a chaos of facts, some of which are so small that they seem insignificant; others loom so large that they are hard to encompass with one synthetic glance' (1916:

419). To be sure, the ultimate aim of the essay is to arrive at the 'rules' that would invest these facts with a systematic form. But this aim can hardly be said to govern the writing itself, its mode of expression, which wends its way through page after page of vivid reminiscences, asides, conjectures, and indulgences that draw the reader deep into the intricacies of an unfamiliar milieu with little sense, at least at first, of what precisely to do with these details. Indeed, as Malinowski himself observes, everything turns on what can be learned 'bit by bit, through actual experience' (1916: 429).

Anthropology has always been a speculative enterprise, wagered on the chance to surpass some determinate picture of the human and its limits. This is something that happens *between* our stories and our arguments, between a space of evocation and the concrete possibilities for thinking otherwise that this space might sustain. With *Reel world*, and the 'thickets' to which you refer, what I tried to do was to allow each of the arguments made in the book to 'grow' from some empirical scene or circumstance, in the manner of expressing an immanent potential for an idea lodged within those scenes (expression, say, in the manner of a seed and stem, rather than as the reflection of a pre-given content). To proceed this way is to imply that description and argument are not mutually exclusive – instead, it's a matter of relative weight or emphasis, a matter of modulating, in other words, that interpretative amplitude that Benjamin wrote about.

To put this more concretely, *Reel world* has been published now as both an academic and a trade book, by Duke University Press in the United States and most elsewhere, and by Penguin Random House in India. I was surprised myself to discover how subtle the difference between these two editions, academic and trade, could actually be in practice. In revising the book for a wider lay audience in India, what I did, most essentially, was to restore to each of the stories a bit of the interpretative latitude with which I'd encountered them in the first place, in most cases paring away just one final layer of elaboration that made sense of them in more explicit and determinate terms. The chapter on art, for example, pursues the idea of art as a work of sensation inextricable from the movement and rhythm of life, as seen in the building of a bridge set over a deep and dangerous ravine in central India by an art director and his crew. The chapter draws towards a close by describing the sensations of terror and vertigo produced by this construction in the film for which it was built. When I describe these reactions to the art director, I write, 'he just laughs – a modest reaction with an ominous charge' (Pandian 2015: 83). It seemed enough, for the trade edition, to leave it at that. But the academic edition includes one further line of elaboration, a line from Deleuze that I hoped would underscore the significance of this laughter: 'In art, and

in painting, as in music . . . it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces' (Deleuze 2003: 48).

Modulating the content of the book in this manner does involve an attunement to the expectations of a potential audience. Very early in the writing, I was taken by the idea of putting all of the ethnographic tribulations of the book in second-person narrative voice, as the experience of a 'you' that could well be the reader herself, rather than a first-person proxy for the author. Many indignant reactions from people reading chapter drafts – 'But I wasn't born in the Bronx!' – led me to scale back this mode of address to certain moments of a much more open-ended nature, as much as I wanted to double down on the unsettling effects of this writerly conceit. But I also knew from my fieldwork that this was how the filmmakers themselves were always working, dialling up or down the focus, length, and intensity of particular images and sounds with a sense of how their force would be received and engaged. And I saw how this process of imagination worked to dissolve the distinction between the maker of a work and its audience, for the audience had already been folded 'inside' the process of production in this manner.

For me, such observations invite a different way of approaching the relationship between a book's author and its audience. We tend to imagine this relationship as a matter of face-to-face contact between two opposed sides, thinking, perhaps, of what happens in a room with a lectern. But how well does this picture correspond to what happens when we write? Who am I talking to, when I'm sitting in my office or somewhere else, whispering or even reading aloud a sentence that has just come together, feeling out its sense and rhythm? I think that the idea of an audience often implies a coherence of presenting self and receiving other that does not correspond very well to the flow of things as they happen. Even when we're talking to others, we can sometimes forget what we are and who we're facing, as the momentum of a story carries us away. Perhaps this is what happens with writing too. The audience then may be less a matter of destination than of medium, less a question of who you will ultimately face, than a matter of what you are already in, the milieu that makes possible an ongoing flow of expression, always populated by a host of ghostly voices and presences of all kinds. Can we call this the audience, that unruly sea of sounds and images within which sentences take shape? It can't ever be truly quiet, can it, when we channel the words that we call writing?

*The relationship between word and image is central to your account. At the start of Reel world, you describe writing of a kind of film that is little known in international circles, and so unusually for writing about film, 'with no assumption that [the reader will] . . . know,*

*or even should know, anything about these particular films' (2015: xvii). Ethnographic writing is always at its limits: trying to make words do more than they have done before. I'm interested in the specific limits you encountered at this word-image interface and the forms of resistance and translation implied in this project: to what extent, and how, was this a creative stimulus? How did film become something more or different in the process of putting it into word? How did ethnographic description become something more or different as an effort to do this?*

This book project, *Reel world*, began as an effort to make sense of the peculiar afterlife of cinematic images, scenes, lyrics, and other fragments among the people of rural Tamil Nadu with whom I worked some years ago for my dissertation fieldwork. A woodcutter I knew very well, for example, who spoke one July morning of the heart as a thieving and deceitful monkey, as he drove his small herd of goats into the fallow stubble south of his village. The image was one he'd borrowed from a popular Tamil film lyric from the 1960s. Manivannan did this often, to muse on the challenges of moral life, but he could hardly ever identify the films from which he borrowed such images. Instead, he would preface such borrowings with general invocations – 'As they have sung in that time . . . ' or, 'As that poet once said . . . '. This mode of reference flies in the face of what we tend to do, as scholars, when we write about cultural artefacts like cinema, ascribing their origins to particular authors and their significance to overarching narratives. But the experience is one that most all of us are familiar with. Who hasn't, these days, had the hazy sense of somehow reliving a scene or a moment from some film once seen, without being able to place that scene or sound or image? What kind of power is this that a cinematic image can hold, even in the absence of its framing setting and context?

Nietzsche tells us that truths always begin as such images, and that their status as truths depends precisely on the forgetting of such origins – 'truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions', he writes, 'worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses' (1911: 180, original emphasis). Nietzsche's insights remind us that there is something quite distinctive in seeking to return an idea to the scene of its emergence, in taking a truth back to the worldly conditions that give rise to its claims. And this, perhaps, is precisely what makes anthropology so strange and valuable as a mode of knowledge. For we write *descriptions* of particular times and places, chains of image and impression that stand, at the very same time, as skeins of idea and concept. The enterprise of ethnography fully depends, therefore, on the forces of sensation and imagination that words can bear. This should be evident from a simple glance at the opening pages of almost any ethnographic monograph.

Anthropological truths always open from images of some world of experience. Can we further bend the direction of our questions by lending these images more deliberate and inventive attention?

The resistance that you describe, though, is real. The chapter of *Reel world* on dreams, for example, lingers on the experience of a screenwriter at a moment of creative impasse, waiting for an image to come, unsure of how to frame and move his story from one scene into another. In the chapter, this impasse is broken unexpectedly by the intercession of a dream, the appearance of a dream-image that becomes the opening scene of a film, an event that reveals the writing process as itself a kind of daydreaming, somewhere between conscious work and unconscious impulse. In my own writing of this book, I tried to put myself into such intermediate states of awareness and attention – drawing the blinds and looping certain cinematic scenes again and again on my screen, for example, letting my thinking drift with the material, and allowing its images and sounds to bleed into the prose I was writing. The ‘wavy’ lines in the chapter on sound are one consequence of such experiments, a transcription of the soundscape formed by the sensory play of sight and sound in a Tamil film, but also an attempt to register the affective course of this movement on the body of the text itself. This would almost necessarily be a failure, I note in that chapter. But the question is this: what can be thought in the face of such impossibility?

Ultimately, this is a book about the ecology of creative process, the germinal potential lodged in those environmental forces and accidental circumstances that, almost by nature, tend to escape our grasp. I was drawn to the resources of image and sound because this is the stuff of the world that enters into our texts, as body, presence, passage, and breach. We are vulnerable to the force of images (Stevenson 2014), and there is an ethical value in tarrying with such vulnerability, for it attests to the promise of a certain kind of openness to the world. With the grave ecological challenges of our time, so much seems to turn on our ability to learn new ways of relating to the world at hand, of changing ourselves in consonance with the dynamic flux of things rather than remaining bent on mastering all of nature’s contingencies. These are the ecological stakes of *Reel world* as both an ethnography of creative process and an experiment with ethnographic form. The images

and other sensory materials that I work with here make our implicatedness in the world a matter of practical exploration. What could happen if we made ourselves and our knowledge more susceptible to worldly events and encounters? Anthropology, it seems to me, has always been wrestling with this question. With this book, I’ve tried to pose it just a bit more intensively.

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