In this special section, we conceptualise ‘Skilled mediations’ to examine the following questions from several ethnographic perspectives: How do skills and media interact, enable and limit our engagement in our material and social environments? How can this be studied ethnographically? We take our previous works on ‘skilled visions’ and ‘enskilment’ as starting points to define skilled mediation as a mode of engagement with the senses, practice, skill and media.

**Key words** skilled visions, skilled mediations, enskilment, senses, vision

**From skilled visions to skilled mediations**

For more than a decade now, scholars of visual and sensory ethnography have argued against the reduction of vision to forms of visualism, and for a re-conceptualisation of vision as a sensory practice that needs ‘educating and training in a relationship of apprenticeship and within an ecology of practice’ (Grasseni 2004: 41; cf. Pink 2012). Case studies from anthropology, history of science and the visual arts support this stance (see for example Grasseni 2007; Cox et al. 2016). With this special section of *Social Anthropology* we introduce the notion of ‘skilled mediations’, building on reflections and appropriations of Grasseni’s ‘skilled visions’ approach, which stated that ‘the making, exchange and manipulation of focusing media plays a fundamental part in the ecology of everyday vision and even of imagination’ (Grasseni 2004: 44, our italics). In that context, ‘focusing media’ stood for the diagrams, toys, brochures, photographs and ranking software that professional breeders use to evaluate their cows, in the relevant ethnographic example:

Dedicated breeders eagerly acquire, collect and exchange such visual materials as magazines, posters, prize photographs or videos of cattle fairs. Often also available on specialist websites, these mediate and propagate the training of the eye, constituting a common idiom, a shared ecology of professional practice. (Grasseni 2004: 44)

We now wish to re-articulate the notion of ‘focusing media’ in the light of key questions and theoretical developments regarding the role of the senses, practice, skill and media in the formation of anthropological knowledge. These questions lead us to define skilled mediation. In this brief introduction we first formulate these key questions, then articulate our argument about skilled mediation with the aid of a recent ethnographic example. Finally, we introduce three articles that engage with this notion ethnographically.
The senses, practice, skill and media

Several debates dominate our discipline and its current attempts at furthering its theoretical and methodological frameworks regarding the senses. One concerns the relationship between the senses, culture and skill. Does sensory anthropology purvey into different historical worldviews (Classen 1997: 402) or does it only make sense to study the senses as skilled practice (Ingold 2000, 2011)? For some authors, a ‘perceptual paradigm’ encompasses ‘sensory meanings and values form the sensory model espoused by a society, according to which the members of that society “make sense” of the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular “worldview”’ (Classen and Howes 2006: 200). For others, ‘what has been thought and written in terms of the senses is necessarily embedded in real-life practices of looking, listening and feeling’ (Ingold 2011: 316). A more recent debate, the so-called ‘ontological turn’, accommodates multiple accents and strains. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004) proposes perspectivism as a radical anthropological approach when he explains that ‘differences of perspective’ do not mean ‘a plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds’ – such that derive from ‘the bodily differences between species’ (p. 4). Other authors underline other ways in which we can take seriously the body and its diverse modes of being affected (following Spinoza). Annemarie Mol studies precisely how the very same object, for example food pleasure, or chronic pain from a debilitating illness, can be differently and paradoxically constructed in multiple discourses, sites and communities of practitioners and co-sensers. Incompatible but strongly normative ontologies on food and the body compete for eaters in their attempt at establishing what it is like to ‘enjoy your food’ (2012). Cox et al. (2016) indicate ‘critical practices beyond text’ as ways of performing sensory anthropology through multiple media. Through innovative fieldwork methods, they respond to the challenge of conceiving of anthropological ways of knowing as understandings of the world – in turn enabled by specific aesthetic practices – rather than representational truths, experimenting with different visual, aural and textual forms.

With ‘skilled mediations’ we wish to indicate how precisely the fact that skilled sensing is by definition learnt, shared, thus collective, hence social, therefore public, means that ‘perspectives’ cannot be psychologised or sensed, but rather studied in their concrete occurrence – a comparative analysis of the incommensurable (cf. Laplantine 2015: 83; Viveiros de Castro 2004: 11). In this sense, our contribution could be seen as a complementary answer to the predicament recently stated by Cox et al. that ‘anthropology continues to struggle to find ways of representing and theorising the sensuous encounter in the field’ (2016: 5). However, in our paths we differ. Our objective is not ‘to open a conversation about how to recognise, use and analyse those works in film, photography and sound that currently exist on the margins of the discipline’. Our objective is to advance the epistemological understanding within anthropology of mediation, a concept indicating the technical and sensory apprenticeship that is intrinsic to enskilment – a process that we identify as crucial to ethnographic practice and anthropological understandings. In our interventions, we focus not so much on how we can use something other than ethnographic writing to render ethnographic knowledge, but rather on how fieldwork experience is itself crucially mediated by tools, educated attention and relevant media – more specifically, we focus on how that synergic, intimately socio-sensorial experience is achieved and how it is experienced as transformational. We are interested in unravelling through ethnography how seeing
through a medium, and in the same breath through a specific schooling of the eye, affects our ways of shaping, fathoming and acting in the world. We thus find another way of answering the call to ‘engage the senses in ethnographic practice’ (Pink 2013) that embraces a further question: how does sensory knowledge stand vis-à-vis knowledge tout-court?

In order to answer this question, we go back to theories of skill, apprenticeship and situated learning (Lave 2011). For Herzfeld (2009), the poetics of skill is never devoid of the politics of gesture: ethnographers and apprentices share the hallmark of the uninitiated ‘other’ vis-à-vis their field interlocutors or skilled connoisseurs. Apprenticeship to the master (or vice versa to a foreign language and culture) thus means undergoing a veritable process of bodily inculcation that shapes, moulds and disciplines the yet-to-be-master. The gradual overcoming of difference happens through what Jean Lave has termed ‘situated learning’; a process of being granted ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) to ever-closer circles of intimacy, being-in-the-know and ultimately power. To the ‘greater access to the protected zones of cultural intimacy’ correspond expectations of recognition as ‘the same’ of ‘us’, not only in terms of linguistic proficiency but also of bodily stance, expectable reactions and generally appropriateness. Such perfectly arbitrary, contextual and eventually learned appropriateness is experienced as domestic, intimate and customary. Normal, in one word.

Such bodily transitions however do not necessarily lead to success (namely mastery of the field or of a profession) but also to the equally skilful mastery of marginality and to phenomenologically embodied codes of class subalternity, which may serve the purposes of a violently classificatory state (Wacquant 2002, 2010). Learning to categorise, decipher and sort the social world is a daily skill, beset by the problem of opaqueness, fuzziness and ambiguous grey zones. This is why transcribing otherness and sameness in bodily codes is an important business, one that capitalist and sovereign powers are busy with (Schepher-Hughes and Wacquant 2002). But on the other hand, bodily codes can also be a space for experimentation and transgression, as in the fraternal morality of sportive competition. Wacquant’s work in a boxing gym of South Side Chicago (2000) shows how photographs and narration co-construct a moral mythology of self-improvement, discipline and collegiality. As hexas (Bourdieu 1972: 83–7), boxing is learned through the body and in the body. As habitus, it embodies a socially competent moral coding that consists of success through self-denial and excellence achieved by subjecting oneself to senior authority. By converse, Harris showed how an incomplete anthropological apprenticeship meant that a fieldworker may well learn the hexas but not the local aesthetics of the very same gesture, which in turn is grounded in the historicity of that practice and its oral mythology of morality (Harris 2005). The processes of mutual recognition within the ensuing confraternity is thus at once phenomenological and cultural-symbolic (Grasseni and Ronzon 2004: 75–9). It is also at once constrained and liberating.

These considerations lead us to our next question, how far can enskilment go? What can be learnt and taken away from a local context of knowledge? While the poetics of skill is increasingly co-opted for neoliberalising purposes, Strangleman (2013) and Dudley (2014) among others have reflected on gentrification as a contemporary condition that makes one ‘wish for skill’: the labouring skills of a lost British industrial working class, or the American artisan’s skill in a growingly priced but deadly narrow niche of highly competent self-standing practitioners whose skilled craftsmanship is appropriately nowadays associated to the work of art. By definition though, the ‘wish
for skill’ of the alienated, gentrified low bourgeoisie neither matches the working-class experience of labouring nor the individual expertise of the artisan.

To regain focus on these intertwined issues of sensorial competence, practice-based learning and skill, we turn our attention to ‘media’ and their role in anthropological knowledge. This is emphatically not a move away from sensory ethnography toward an anthropology of media but rather a critical reflection on how mediation is crucial to enskilment, sensory knowledge and knowledge in practice – thus offering an ideal follow-up to the special issue on ‘What is a medium?’ published in Social Anthropology in 2011. Eisenlohr (2011) pointed out how, in Münker and Roesler’s (2008) survey, any of the following had been considered a ‘medium’ in scholarship: a chair, a wheel, a mirror (McLuhan); a school class, a soccer ball, a waiting room (Flusser); the electoral system, a general strike, the street (Baudrillard); a horse, the dromedary, the elephant (Virilio); money, power and influence (Parsons); art, belief and love (Luhmann). Schäuble’s work (2016) focuses on the sensual characteristic of media such as cinema, in particular its manipulative power and physiological impact on the viewer, in order to ask questions about invisible and often unfathomable experiences such as reverie, recollection or heightened awareness.

The ambivalence of the word ‘medium’ helps us conjure the scenario of someone or something aiding and inducing hyper-perception, admitting to presences disclosed only through ambiguous practices and initiated knowledge. Furthermore, Birgit Meyer reminds us of the social formation of collective imagination, both in terms of its composition as communities and in the dynamic sense of their ‘processes of forming through shared imaginations’, looking particularly at ‘the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, moulding their bodies, and making sense’ (2009: 7). In response to this challenge, we build on previous methodological proposals to introduce techniques of digital visual engagement (Grasseni and Walters 2014) that bring to the fore the process of ‘mediation’ of public imaginaries. We literally imagine through media (Meyer 2009; Eisenlohr 2011).

**Skilled mediation as a form of engagement**

Taking stock of these realisations, we propose ‘engagement’ as a keyword to navigate an anthropological course among this multidisciplinary scholarship. Focusing on what people actually do, engagement describes their practical attitude in generating knowledge: a skilled engagement through the senses, in practice, in local contexts, mediated by ‘focusing media’. We trace back the value of such an approach to the philosophy of technology, which has become rather influential in anthropology during the last decades whether in its phenomenological (Heidegger 1977) or pragmatist (Dewey 1981 [1925]) approaches (see Ingold 2000; Pink 2013; Jackson 2002). These works have helped to elaborate critically what engagement might mean and what kind of variations of engagement might be possible. The point here is, of course, that the notion of use (as in ‘media use’) or incorporation are too simplistic to describe what engagement is about. Media are not just used or incorporated into the practice (or bodily system); nor are they simple ‘extensions of the senses’ (McLuhan 1994). Media, literally, mediate.
A first approximation to the complexity of mediation can be found in the classic work on the (post)phenomenology of human–machine relations by Don Ihde (1974), who distinguishes three modes of relations: embodiment relations, hermeneutic relations and background relations. An embodiment relation describes an experience of the world through a machine whereby the machine itself has a ‘partial transparency’ so that it becomes incorporated into the body that is oriented towards the world (e.g. the blind person’s cane, see Merleau-Ponty 2004). As a form of mediation, the experience of the world is transformed through this transparency as it either extends or reduces the sensory relation to the world. For example, telephone communication reduced multisensory engagement. In the hermeneutic relation, the machine is part of the experienced world, becomes ‘other’, i.e. it is objectified or categorised as such – either through malfunctioning or deliberate attention. Finally, in background relations, machines are the ‘surrounding presence’ or atmosphere/technosphere in which we live without attending consciously towards it for most of the time. Ihde describes this technosphere as a ‘being among machines’ which is characteristic of modern technological societies (see Ihde 2009).

We take from Ihde that these mediations are complex and dynamic, oscillating between ambiguity and clarification, without being all-encompassing or totalising. We further find it useful to situate the role of ‘focusing media’ within technospherical background relations (without flattening the various media in a symmetrical cartography, see below). Yet we find the concept of ‘machine’ too narrow and prefer a broader conception of ‘media’, as we explained before. Moreover, our scope is wider than Ihde’s as we situate the human–machine–world relation within ecologies and communities of practice. Thus media, in our understanding, connect, afford, shape and in the same breath sometimes obstructively and persistently stand in the way of knowledge making. Recently rekindled anthropological interest in ‘sound films’ and ‘auditory journeys’ (see for example Carlyle and Cox 2016; Karel 2016) also resonates with our focus. However, our own way of ‘explicitly link[ing] the realms of sensory perception, aesthetic appreciation and the operation of technology in describing cultural otherness’ (Cox et al. 2016: 4) pivots on the notion of skilled mediation. Far from considering the senses tout-court as a form of mediation, we are interested in the forms of training the senses, with and through apparata, devices and interfaces, which fully articulate the mediatory role of learning how-to-do-things with ‘media’ of various kinds: objects, artefacts, instruments, digital interfaces, cameras, etc. as enabling channels of enskilment. Yet there is space for more critical investigations that analyse mediations also as inhibiting enskilment (Gieser 2014; see also Cox et al. 2016).

To mediate is to reconfigure and transform whole practices, ecologies of relations, knowledges, senses and bodies. While the impact of some media in a given practice is marginal, there are usually a few that act as ‘focusing media’ for a practice. These focusing media are so central that much of the learning and enskilment processes revolve around them. It is with them that the powers of reconfiguration and transformation become most apparent – not just for practitioners but for anthropologists, too. This goes against the grain of current network or rhizome approaches, which postulate a level playing field of equally important ‘actants’ (Latour 2005). Our approach, in contrast, gives preference to ethnography: reenactors in Germany single out particular ‘historical’ objects for their practice, for forestry workers the chainsaw is one of their key tools, and editing software may be instrumental in the construction of a certain modality of digital visual engagement, as our three special theme articles illustrate.
If we understand mediation thus not as a network of interacting actants but as a mediation of a whole ecology of practice, then we highlight that engagement always needs to be learned. It is a process of sociocultural learning and sensory education. With regard to focusing media, this learning process is a particular complex and recursive one. Not only do we need to learn the skills of engaging with these media; we also need to integrate the skilled use of the focusing medium within the wider ecology of practice which, in turn, is reconfigured when the medium is introduced. A mutual correspondence between the various focusing media and between the focusing media and the practice as a whole has to be established in a process of continual enskilment and re-skilling. Mediation in this sense points to processes of ‘transduction’ (Helmreich 2007; Ingold 2013).

Stefan Helmreich introduced this concept to understand ‘the transmutation and conversion of signals across media’ (2010: 10) in the ‘cyborgian setting’ of a submarine where underwater soundscapes have to be made audible through various technologies. Transduction here refers to the technological mediation of sound that makes listening possible in the first place. More generally, transduction concerns ‘the material transformations across media that have to unfold for the seemingly seamless transfer of information in cybernetic systems to be accomplished’ (2007: 623). We follow Helmreich’s assessment that mediation is as much a question of flow as it is one of resistances, turbulences and distortions. Yet we would not overemphasise the role of technology. The role of skill in similar processes has been elaborated on by Tim Ingold (2013). He argues that transducers ‘convert the ductus – the kinetic quality of the gesture, its flow or movement – from one register, of bodily kinaesthesia, to another, of material flux’ (2013: 102). Hence, transduction becomes a matter of skilled mediation: a ‘sentient awareness’ engaging with ‘focusing media’ within formative and transformative practices.

Let us illustrate our argument with a brief vignette drawn from Gieser’s current fieldwork with hunters in Germany. 1 We switch for this purpose to the first person singular.

During the first phase of my apprenticeship-style research, I was not allowed to handle a gun (for legal reasons) and thus had to learn about hunting without a gun. Usually, I would join my mentor on a raised seat or would go and sit on one nearby, observing the landscape and waiting for game to appear without noticing me. Through repeated practice, I learned more and more on how to behave and move around in the restrained space of the raised seat in order to be almost invisible, inaudible, ‘un-smellable’ to animals nearby. At the same time, I also learned how to perceive the landscape around me with various senses, noticing anything that might be game-related: tracks, trails, openings in the vegetation and so on. After one year, I thought my sensory education as a hunter had proceeded quite well and that I had actually learned – at least to some degree – to experience and perceive the hunt as hunters do.

When I finally had my hunting licence and my gun in hand, however, I discovered that hunting from a raised seat had changed significantly. It began with climbing the ladder to the seat with a cumbersome shouldered rifle (with a precious, fragile high-tech telescopic sight on top). It continued with moving around in the small cabin on top of the seat with the rather long rifle in my hand, without banging it on wood and making noise. My whole kinaesthetic skill in moving stealthily had to be adjusted in

1 For more on Gieser’s fieldwork on hunting in Germany, see his blog on hunter-anthropologist.de.
order to cope with this new attachment of the gun to my bodily system. The same goes for my body’s relation to space, namely to the seat and windows. No longer was my main imperative only to place myself in a way so I could see best. Now I had to learn how to observe through and with the telescopic sight including how to look around it for a wider field of vision and how to combine both ways of looking. This could not be achieved without kinaesthetic feedback on how to seat myself in a way that was optimal for placing my rifle and shooting. Eventually I found that even the way I perceived the landscape had transformed as I had to consider free range, distance, safety of various shooting situations and so on. As it turned out, I could not learn to perceive like a hunter without the gun. After all, a hunter is not just any keen nature observer but a particular one who distinguishes him- or herself by the intention to kill. This intention is transduced to my focusing medium, the gun, through my skilled handling and skilled vision. A raised seat had to be built, my body be positioned, the gun be held, a trigger be pulled, a bullet be released …

For the comparative enterprise of anthropology, our approach opens up new pathways for investigation. When, for example, studying different ‘hunting cultures’, their differences and similarities can be described with regard to their focusing media and the skilled mediations they afford. Exchange the gun for a spear, a blowpipe, a bow, and the whole ecology of practice is reconfigured and transformed.

**Skilled mediation in editing, re-enactment and tree felling**

We offer ‘skilled mediation’ as a special theme to focus ethnographically on how sensory experience, practice, skill and media interact to mediate our engagement with our cognitive, material and social environment. How can this be investigated ethnographically? The papers that follow build on original appropriations of the ‘skilled vision’ approach as presented in Milan’s EASA Conference of July 2016 in a panel on Skilled Engagements, co-convened by Grasseni with Rupert Cox and Thorsten Gieser as discussant.

Drawing on her digital visual ethnography of documentary film makers, viewers, students and teachers, Franziska Weidle explores novel ways of looking through and with computational environments using the focusing medium of the Korsakow software. This authoring programme facilitates the production of multilinear, interactive documentaries by providing a complex interface that allows for endless combinations and recombinations of ‘smallest narrative units’. Addressing questions of media enskilment, she analyses how a skilled mediation with Korsakow challenges and unsettles established norms of viewing unilinear documentaries while enabling the development of new ‘networked’ visions that correspond to increasingly complex media ecologies. She argues that engagement with digital worlds meant being in a state of constant realignment: augmented by mobile devices, software interfaces and networked information – although this algorithmically infrastructured environment stays hidden from unskilled attention. Skilled ‘digital visual engagements’ (Grasseni and Walter 2014) are thus ways of looking at computational networked environments that are aware of the hidden work of generative algorithms as ‘cognitive artefacts’ (Norman 1991).
Anja Dreschke looks at popular historic re-enactments in Germany to explore how an ‘aesthetic of authenticity’ is a mediated and embodied culture of perception. The present-day ‘Huns’ that gather periodically in Cologne practice mimetic imagining and embodiment taking popular cinema as a source of vernacular culture and a means of historicising identity. These communities of amateurs appropriate globally circulating audio-visual media representations to the point of making them part of a bespoke ecology of culture. To gain ‘the hunnic eye’ means to be able to appreciate, at first sight and unself-consciously, the appropriate ensemble of kitsch, self-staging and Hollywood quotes that correspond to the local aesthetics of a close-knit circle. As Ronzon (2007) noted of a corresponding performing environment (that of so-called drag performers in Italian clubs), visual cues, textual inscriptions and a communally performed discourse are negotiated and translated into bodily performance, material décor as well as open-ended discussion of what is ‘appropriate’ here and now. It is this fully cultural appropriateness that is voiced as an ‘aesthetic of authenticity’ and should thus not be confused with historical evidence.

Building on his own sensory apprenticeship during his professional work in nature conservation in the UK, Thorsten Gieser examines the ‘skilled listening’ involved in tree felling with a chainsaw, and thereby re-evaluates the aesthetics of ‘noise’. Contrary to common conceptions of noise as unwanted, intolerable, chaotic and ultimately meaningless sound, he shows how noise is re-configured as a form of acoustic knowing for skilled chainsaw practitioners. Through a thick, phenomenological description of the practice of tree felling, Gieser reveals a richly structured ‘acoustemology’ (Feld 2005) of the chainsaw as a focusing medium within the ecology of listening: including the subject, his equipment, materials and the landscape. He argues that listening with and through the chainsaw accounts for a trained sensibility to the aesthetic and syn-aesthetic order of the focusing medium which enables practitioners to feel-into and respond to the dynamic unfolding of the work-in-progress.

**Conclusion**

As ethnographers, we foster skilled engagements with the senses and with media, with practice and skill with/through media; by doing so, we critically investigate mediated ‘evidence’. By articulating and exemplifying ethnographically the concept of ‘focusing media’ anew, we took into consideration how both media (in the standard meaning of the term) and tools in skilled practice may function as catalysts of our attention and action. In our ethnographic cameo, the gun is a catalyst not just because one has to look down its barrel, but because the apprentice has to work one’s way around it: thus the medium reconfigures the affordances of the tools, the hexis of learned practice with it and the habitus of the community of users. The resulting holistic practice (the grounded and historised ‘improvisational ability’ that Harris observed among Caboclo fishermen (Harris 2005)) thus takes form in a taskscape that is deeply structured, both constraining and requesting creative engagement.

Through critically engaging with fieldwork and diverse ecologies of practice, this special section shows how apprenticeship into the sociality of the senses, practice, skill and media introduce the ethnographer into specific forms of aesthetic, relational and sensory experience – all significant dimensions of mediation. The multiplicity of digital pathways, the mediated criteria for choosing how to embody and re-enact the past, the embodied enskilment of learning to use weapons, concretise and complexify our
understanding of engagement. Taking the ‘skilled visions’ approach and enskilment processes as a starting point for our reflections on ethnographic learning, we underline how enskilment and socialisation of ‘media’ coexist in an ecology of practice, namely specific forms of sociality and aesthetics mediated by artefacts and structured environments. This ‘decentralises’ a unique focus on the senses and media per se, to refocus on the process of mediation, namely an entangled social, bodily and semiotic process of relationality and sensual communication. These ‘mediations’ include but are not limited to digital media practices or alternative media, and lead to a broad ethnographic investigation of personal and collective learning.

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Introduction: De la médiation habile

Dans ce dossier, il s’agit de conceptualiser la notion de « médiation habile » (Skilled Mediations) afin d’aborder les questions suivantes à partir de plusieurs points de vue ethnographiques : Comment les compétences et les médias interagissent-ils, permettent-ils et limitent-ils notre engagement dans nos environnements matériels et sociaux ? Comment est-il possible d’analyser ces phénomènes en termes ethnographiques ? Cette étude s’appuie sur nos travaux antérieurs au sujet de « visions compétentes » et de « l’acquisition de compétences » pour définir la médiation habile en tant que mode d’engagement des sens, pratiques, compétences et média.

Mots-clés compétences visuelles, médiation habile, acquisition de compétences, vision, les sens