

Reflecting Upon Interculturality in Ethnographic Filmmaking

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Abstract: Ethnographic filmmaking captures a language that is different from that of written ethnography and as such constitutes an important research medium. However, written and spoken forms of qualitative research still overshadow the visual realm and the paper addresses this gap by arguing that the language of ethnographic filmmaking is central to our understanding of *otherness*. It demonstrates the role of film in illuminating the "intercultural" dynamics between minority (participant) and majority (researcher) and in challenging the traditional power relations between the researcher and his/her "subjects". Ethnographic filmmaking is a research technique that has evolved considerably since its early colonial usage (based largely around disempowered and stereotyped representations of *otherness*). This evolution began to take hold in the 1970's, with a wave of self-criticism and theoretical reflection about the role and impact of the ethnographic film. The result, today, is a great deal of reflexivity and inter-subjectivity and a more nuanced appreciation of interculturality within qualitative research. It is this relatively recent and growing personal and theoretical reflection—allied with the fact that the ethnographic film is still very much an under-utilised research technique—that provides the basis for the paper.

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1. Introduction

This article will consider a very specific type of non-fiction cinema, the so called ethnographic cinema, which is based on ethnographic principles and is an heir of colonialist ethnography. Ethnographic cinema is a product of social science, especially of anthropology, and as such has mirrored the developments and "crisis of representation" within these fields. Through the audiovisual language, ethnographic cinema has proven to be a unique medium of representation, able to capture sensuality and expressiveness that can hardly be grasped through other languages. [1]

As a product of colonialism, ethnographic cinema, for a long period, created audiovisual narratives of *exotic others* that have now been largely criticised and discredited. Today, we are witnessing a change within non-fiction cinema in which cultural identities are being analysed and represented very differently from how they were in the past. We can increasingly see, for instance, films where there is a multiplicity of voices—polyphonic films—, where contradictory arguments appear, or filming conventions are broken; where in short, cultural difference is increasingly freed from tight scientific conceptions. [2]

This paper reviews the definition of ethnographic filmmaking, its linkage to ethnography and how they both evolved through different phases. In these phases the authority of *scientific objectivity* was effectively undermined and new styles of representation appeared. Reflexivity played a pivotal role in such evolution, leading to what was called *intersubjective* films in which there is a conscious construction of "spaces of shared authority" between researcher and researched. [3]

The reflection as outlined above is intended to bring us closer to the very under-researched field of audiovisual methods in social sciences and to the way they can be used to favour participation and interculturality¹. Interculturality should be seen as a cultural negotiation between social subjects, difficult to achieve and equally complex to read. Moreover, true interculturality requires that such negotiations occur before, during and after the filming process in order to decentralise the authority of the researcher. [4]

2. Ethnographic Filmmaking vs. Ethnographic Writing

By using the written ethnography as a reference, which is closer to the research experiences of most social scientists, the paper will demonstrate the value of ethnographic filmmaking for social research. Ethnographic films are not just the sum of ethnography and cinema; as a process of representation and as a product of this process, the ethnographic film entails a new and distinct audiovisual language. The process of representation in social sciences involves a permanent tension between absence and presence of the context of analysis. In the case of the audiovisual technique, this presence is extremely close and vivid, whereas in the process of writing there is a much greater absence due to the distance in time and space. [5]

In the first instance, therefore, the ethnographer must struggle to distance himself from the field. He may do so by employing different filming strategies that provide a more, or less, complete context. When writing, however, the researcher has to make an effort to evoke the presences of the context, using word images,

1 I confess to feel some degree of dissatisfaction when using terms such as multiculturalism or interculturality (the later more popular in Spanish cultural diversity debate). The reason is that these concepts have progressively been absorbed by political discourses. Hence, it is common that they become synonymous of a cultural diversity that has been conceived for political purposes, i.e. to target populations in order to implement policies. Obviously this is not the place to deepen in this discussion. In the text I would determine what aspects of interculturality will be relevant to the present discussion.

metaphors and other stylistic tools (CRAWFORD, 1992, pp.67-71) The camera, then, is not only an auxiliary tool in ethnography, it is much more than this. It modifies relations in the field, both in terms of influencing the interaction of participants and in terms of providing an extra dimension to the field analysis (ARDEVOL, 1998, p.225). [6]

The audiovisual data contained in the ethnographic film is also different from written material because it is already highly codified. Written material, in contrast, must be subject to a specific phase of codifying and textualising with more external categories likely to be imposed as a result. In many ways, films allow the data more space to speak for itself—an argument advanced by Claudine DE FRANCE (1989) who tells us that filming allows social behaviour to keep its unity instead of separating it by using academic schemes (ARDEVOL, 1998, p.221). The ethnographic film in particular can be extraordinarily useful because of its ability to capture situations or capture what symbolic interactionists term "the constitutive atoms of social life". Nonetheless, it is less successful in attempting to reproduce abstract concepts such as those handled in written texts (DELGADO, 1999, p.71). [7]

The production of an ethnographic film is not so dissimilar to the development of written ethnography. Even though it is not always beneficial to use a camera, if one finds the right situation, film can be used and the information gathered can be especially powerful. Representations of rituals, for instance, where music, rhythm and sensual expressions are pivotal in the overall experience can really benefit from the use of audiovisual media. The representations developed through images and sound can be far more evocative, immediate and in-depth than anything one would register through writing alone. This is not to say audiovisual is better, just that it offers an additional tool that in certain circumstances is particularly powerful. [8]

3. The Fundamentals of Ethnographic Filmmaking

Ethnography requires long periods of immersion by the researcher in the field. The main method used in ethnography is participant observation, and the aim in using this method is to facilitate the understanding of cultural contexts from the "inside". The researcher generally only elaborates his theoretical and conceptual perspectives having first examined the categories and values of those being studied. It is rare that the ethnographer would approach the study with a pre-established set of theoretical or conceptual structures. This method explicitly aims to avoid ethnocentrism in order to develop meaningful relations between research and participant. At the same time as seeking to equalise power relations between representor (researcher) and represented (participant), the ethnographer must also retain a degree of distance so as not to "go native". These general ethnographic principles also apply to the ethnographic film as we shall see below. [9]

High quality ethnographic fieldwork could well be jeopardised by attempting to do ethnographic film without paying attention to the way in which the "reality" being filmed is constructed. In this sense, styles of filming are central to the way we

represent cultural difference. By using the example of the so called *expositional style* I hope to reflect upon the way we can affect the representation of cultural *otherness* by using different techniques during the construction of the ethnographic film. [10]

The expositional style, used widely in TV documentaries² and to some extent in ethnographic films, reproduces otherness and the colonialist and post-colonialist discourses underpinning this. In effect, there is an argument around which the film is constructed, and through which it evolves, and the images and narratives are chosen to support this. There is a construction of narrative authority through the systematic use of voice-overs and these voice-overs tend to be unambiguous. Therefore, a moral stance tends to underlie the comments, and this stance is generally based upon *us/them* divides. Narrations can also reach a high degree of abstraction, much higher than one could achieve through images and polyphonic voice registers. Such a filming style—whether for a TV documentary or for an ethnographic film—is highly codified and says as much about the cultures behind the camera as those in front. CRAWFORD defines expositional style as a "perspicuous mode of filming" meaning that these films are "ready-made, and with a nice wrapping and detailed instructions for use" (CRAWFORD, 1992, p.75). [11]

In-depth fieldwork should provide the basis for the ethnographic film determining structure and contents in advance. It provides the broader context, or menu from which particular moments are captured. It also allows us to locate these moments within the lives of participants. Moreover, film-making based on detailed ethnographic fieldwork should always tend towards intercultural representations, and in doing so allow participants the space and authority to influence the film. [12]

4. Reconsidering Mono-cultural Scientific Interpretations

Cinema and ethnography share a common origin in the sense that both developed out of the Euro-American intellectual tradition of the late XIX century and both, as a result, were historically linked to a colonial context. This context undoubtedly shaped what they produced and we will return to this issue later. More recently, the 1970's saw a crisis of representation in anthropology and other social sciences (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986) and this crisis did not leave ethnographic filmmaking untouched. [13]

The positivist tradition in the social sciences has meant that the language of the natural sciences has been evident over the twentieth century, with social scientists trying to be neutral, objective and unambiguous in their writings. Over the same period this rhetoric of objectivity has been paralleled by ethnographic filmmakers utilising the aforementioned expositional style. Drawing the two traditions together helps one to see what has been termed the "fallacy" of

2 TV Documentaries cannot be considered ethnographic cinema as, generally, there is not an ethnographic work done behind. Of course this assertion is opened to discussion depending on the particularities of each case. Nevertheless, the fact that they are conceived for mass audiences is a burden towards experimental and complex narratives that are often needed for qualified ethnographic filmmaking.

scientific objectivity, particularly when one is using media such as the ethnographic film. [14]

KUHN, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) calls science a product of a certain paradigm contextualised in a historical moment. Other authors such as BOURDIEU and FOUCAULT have sought to uncover the mysteries of science by arguing that scientific truth is dependant on a historical and social context. In anthropology the first critiques of this nature were directed towards colonialist researchers. Some, like MALINOWSKI, MEAD and BATESON, pointed out how anthropological knowledge could be used for imperialist purposes and highlighted the ethnocentrism of colonial research (cited in CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986). Following the colonial critique that identified the particular political purpose and power relations underneath certain types of ostensibly "objective" research, there was a period of silence. This silence was broken by GEERTZ's work in the 1970's. GEERTZ defined ethnography as an interpretation:

"to understand the line that separates representation mode and substantive content can't be drew in the cultural analysis as it can't be done in painting, and this fact seems to threat at the same time the objective condition of anthropological knowledge when it suggests that its source is, not social reality, but scholar artifice" (GEERTZ, 1973 p.16). [15]

His work was followed by others, and although there were differences, all broadly agreed that social science's *object* of study is not precisely an object, more a subject. [16]

The recognition that the exposition of *truth* is mediated by scientists' own language, background, subjective experience, and even by his emotions and feelings was important and had parallels with philosophical shifts more generally. NOCHLIN'S (1971) work analysing the realist literature notes how: "Realism is in a highly ambiguous relation to the highly problematical concept of *reality* (...) and it is selective in what chooses to describe and prescribe" (cited in APTHORPE, 1997, p.52). The question that emerged from this work was how can researchers pursue a shared cognition with the subjects being studied, and avoid being the monophonic authority? Reflexivity represents a first and pivotal step towards avoiding the past attempts to be "the shaman [s] of objectivity" (RUBY, 1995, p.164). [17]

The idea of power underpins this turn to reflexivity. It relates to a concern for more even research-participant relations and is based on FOUCAULT's theoretical work. Power, according to FOUCAULT, is best understood as a set of strategies or *power technologies* that exist both in the dominated and in the dominating and these are mobile and multidirectional. This idea rejects the notion of power as domination through the possession of authority. It is not to deny that hierarchical relationships exist, rather to say that these are not the essence of power³. [18]

3 For a review on FOUCAULT's idea of power see for instance DREYFUS and RABINOW (1986).

In the context of ethnographic filmmaking, power can be found in the techniques used by the filmmaker to construct his authority within the film; these techniques can be simply styles of narration, the selection of whom is to be filmed, etc. This is clearly evident in the case of the expositional style examined above. These types of films are built through a number of techniques, including: objective-like commentaries; the choice of prominent people in the community to support the central argument; and the use of voice-overs to impose the filmmaker's own categories and values. There is an implicit disempowerment that results; the subjects of the film become *objectified* and "the person is seen but does not see; its object of information but is never a subject of communication" (BURCHELL, 1993, p.268). [19]

In order to subvert power relations within ethnographic films, there must be some degree of reflexivity. Reflexivity can be either explicit or implicit, either way it shows that the researcher accepts that he/ she is part of the process of data generation. Reflexivity in ethnographic film addresses the long-standing criticisms of this research tool and demonstrates that the researcher is clear about epistemological issues that would have once been masked (RUBY, 1995, pp.162-163). [20]

5. Reflexive Ethnographic Films

Reflexivity, as an expression of self-consciousness, has existed in both ethnographic filmmaking and written ethnography from their inception. It first appeared in films that were, paradoxically, close to an expositional style. The Soviet filmmaker VERTOV, for example, understood the role of the filmmaker to be a communicator telling the truth; in his case during the 1920's and 1930's around the events of the Soviet revolution. VERTOV calls this *Kino Pravda* (truth-cinema). Clearly, there is a contradiction between his propagandistic and ideological intentions and his conviction of showing the *truth* or the *reality*. Nevertheless, he was significant because he used reflexivity to stress the role of filmmakers as craftsmen and women who edit and select footage, and in doing so depict a particular reality. VERTOV's insights were central in the subsequent development of ethnographic filmmaking; the 1960's "observational style" is clearly an heir of VERTOV's reflexive approach. [21]

Observational cinema, or direct cinema as it is sometimes called, grew out of the arrival of synchronic sound and smaller camera sizes. Essentially this style aimed to reproduce reality through filming the spontaneity of life with minimal intervention from the research team or narrator. The camera, advocates of observational cinema argued, should be like "a fly on the wall". However, the style was criticised for its naivety in assuming that the view of the ethnographer was not present in such an approach. Who, for example, was selecting the spaces and times of filming, or the camera angle, size, and lens, and who was editing the film? The approach failed to recognise the "invisible hand" behind the camera and assumed film to be a neutral technology that allowed the viewer to see reality without interference. In short, observational cinema was criticised for not being

sufficiently reflexive over the processes and technologies that created "*fly on the wall*" documentaries. [22]

The above represents the early first attempts of reflexivity in ethnographic filmmaking, and over time a deeper and more meaningful reflexivity developed. RUBY (1995, p.166), for instance, breaks ethnographic filmmaking down into producer, process and product. The producer is effectively the researcher(s) behind the camera; the process is the fieldwork and filming methods, means and techniques; and the product is the ethnographic film itself after various stages of editing have been completed. To be reflexive, argues RUBY, means that we must be conscious of all three of these steps, reflect upon the processes by which ethnographic films are constructed, and relay this to the audiences. [23]

An early contributor to the more reflexive approach that followed on from observational cinema was WORTH (1972). He introduced a more detailed and critical-analytical approach to examining ethnographic film by asking *why* and *with what purpose* the film had been constructed. WORTH understood cinema as a: "language and, therefore, as a mode of representation, form of narration and means of communication that will go parallel to other cultural manifestations and that will reflect the cognitive schemes of a specific social group" (cited in ARDEVOL, 1998, p.225). [24]

Reflexivity, today, is visible through a number of specific strategies: the use of meta-narratives; discussions over power position within the filmed and between the researcher and participants; emphasis on the film as discourse; and, revealing the partiality of the *reality* captured on film. These strategies have led to the development of a discernible *reflexive style* to which MIN-HA and MACDOUGALL are important contributors. Trinh MIN-HA has experimented with new modes of representation criticising realism as a mode of domination. Arguably her films lack in-depth fieldwork to inform their production as she considers herself an *other* with a special sensibility towards representing *otherness*. In spite of such an ambiguous relationship to ethnography, her reflections on domination, representation and the *other* in films mark important contributions⁴. David MACDOUGALL is one of the most important filmmaking theorists, starting as an observational filmmaker he later criticised this style and moved to more reflexive films⁵. MACDOUGALL has been particularly interested in the way an ethnographic film can become incorporated into the stories that the researcher is narrating. This phenomenon happens for instance in his film *Familiar Places* (1977) where Aboriginal people from Australia incorporate the film into the narratives of their rituals. [25]

4 For instance, in MIN HA's book *Woman, native, other: writing post-coloniality and feminism* she deepens in her deconstructionist analysis through experiences of marginality.

5 A great number of his texts can be found in *Transcultural Cinema*, a compilation of David MACDOUGALL's texts edited by Lucien TAYLOR.

6. Towards Intersubjective Ethnographic Films

Just as authoritarian constructions of *otherness* inside films were eventually eroded, so today we see that *intersubjectivity* is the contemporary challenge for the ethnographic films. This challenge entails the construction of spheres of negotiated authority between researcher and subject; polyphonic spaces of communication that allow reflexivity, explicitly or implicitly, to be put into practice. [26]

The first significant attempt at intersubjectivity stemmed from an engineer's personal filming aspirations. In his film *Nanook of the North* (1922), FLAHERTY constructed a fiction of the life of the Eskimo Nanook who would fight with nature and play the role of the *authentic* native. In constructing this narrative, the Eskimo had a pivotal role not only as the main character of the film, but also as a decision-maker before and during its recording. FLAHERTY also used shots, before editing the film, to gain feedback from the Eskimo and his family. This was arguably the earliest use of what is now called the *participant camera*, something ethnographic filmmakers are "still clumsily experimenting with" (ROUCH, 1995, p.99). [27]

Following on from the work of FLAHERTY an *interactive style* developed in ethnographic film with ROUCH⁶ and MORIN at the fore through their film *Chronique d'un Été* (1960) in which they asked people on the street about their personal lives effectively constructing the body of the film through unplanned interactions. This style aimed to develop a shared authority within the film by allowing moments of encounter between researcher and participant to influence the production process. ROUCH took the interactive style further and deeper through what was called *ethnofictions* in which people fictionalise their own lives. His work took place mainly in Africa and his films, as well as being participant orientated and intersubjective, implicitly contested the tradition of colonialist and postcolonialist non-fiction cinema. [28]

Adopting a similar perspective, MACDOUGALL, reflected upon the fact that very few films, have, even partially, been *possessed* by their subjects. This "possession" tends only to occur if the film has direct practical and symbolic relevance to the subjects, and/or the academic and aesthetic interests of the filmmaker are close to the interests of those being filmed. He cites a Navajo man's question to a filmmaker: "will cinema be of any help for my sheep?" (MACDOUGALL, 1995, p.413) in order to demonstrate this point. It is one thing to be reflexive but quite another achieving a genuinely interactive style. Moreover, no matter how hard we try to build a subject-to-subject relationship in the film, the voice of the "other" will always be second to the motives of the film maker. Reflexivity may be used to examine the production of reality through the film and

6 Jean ROUCH was influenced by surrealism and by the work of the anthropologist Marcel GRIAULE who would theorise about the role of the ethnographer as an action-provoking element. He understood the reality generated by the camera in these terms: "When I have a camera and a microphone, I'm not my usual self, I'm in a strange state, in a *ciné-transe*. This is the objectivity that one can expect, being perfectly conscious that the camera is there and that people know it. From that moment, we live in an audio-visual galaxy: a new truth emerges, *cinéma vérité*, which has nothing to do with normal reality" ([Jean ROUCH Tribute website](#), retrieved on 15th of August, 2005).

to highlight this production to the film's audience, but its power to allow *exotic others* who star in the film to speak and to contribute for themselves and on their own terms is much more problematic. [29]

Recently, however, it is true that indigenous media has developed and that the ethnocentricity of the ethnographic film has been further challenged. The filmmaker has become a channel of communication for those being filmed towards their own audience and audiovisual media have increasingly been used by indigenous⁷ people for their own political or social purposes. Somehow, though, this is an oxymoron as it combines indigenous structures of thought as well as the institutional structures of TV and cinema (SHOHAT & STAM 2002, p.55). It is also an interesting example that goes beyond intersubjectivity between researcher and participants. In this case they both are the same thing as the researchers are participants simultaneously. The blurring of the frontier that traditionally separates researcher and participants is something also acknowledged by MACDOUGALL when he talks of the "very common phenomena that is barely described; the feeling that your work disintegrates and is absorbed and claimed by the lives that generated it" (MACDOUGALL, 1995, p.403). Today, then, ethnographic cinema has moved into interstitial spaces that question and deconstruct orthodox representations of *otherness*. It has abandoned languages that objectify the *other* and lead us to reflect, through audiovisual language, on the ambiguity and permeability of cultural identity. [30]

7. Conclusions

In many respects ethnographic cinema has evolved in parallel with the various stages and critical ruptures of social science. Cinema and science have, for instance, both been concerned with colonial legacies and questions over the exoticisation and objectification of the *other*, concerns that have led to a critical re-evaluation of the methods used to engage with the *real world*. Like the methodological advances in social science, ethnographic cinema has adopted reflexive tools for self-critique and has challenged the fallacies of *neutral knowledge* creation. In cinematographic terms, reflexivity translates to a series of processes and techniques that are largely dependant upon who is behind and/ or who directs the camera, as well as who edits the film that is produced. Early ethnographic cinema—arguably before social scientists had appreciated the full importance of concepts such as reflexivity—engaged with the myriad processes and techniques that create representations of *reality*. The most obvious example of this was in experimenting with interculturality: where the cultures of the researcher and the researched were negotiated and roles were to some extent reversed. [31]

7 The most active centres of indigenous media are the North American Indians (Inuit, Yup'ik), Indians from the Amazon Basin (Nambiquara, Kayapo) and the Australian aborigines (Warlpiri, Pitjanjajari). For the Kayapo, for instance, the video is more than a medium for cultural representation, it is also a media for social action. Through their films, they put pressure over the Brazilian government and they managed to expand internationally their cause. An example of the later is the film *Kayapo: out of the forest* (1989) (SHOHAT & STAM, 2002, p.57)

As social scientists began exploring the methodological and epistemological complexities of qualitative enquiry, so ethnographic filmmakers such as MIN-HA, ROUCH and MACDOUGALL began advancing beyond the early experiments with intercultural representation. Starting from the 1970s the processes and product of ethnographic film became more unpredictable as experiments with, and insights into, reflexivity advanced at considerable pace. The decade witnessed a move away from rather formal monophonic representations, and the opening up of new filmmaking possibilities. It marked a point at which we began to rethink the effect of ethnographic films, both in terms of the use of ethnographic knowledge and in terms of the people being filmed. Today, these developments in the methods of representation used in ethnographic film have an even larger audience. New film genres have opened up, most intriguingly from indigenous and minority media, and questions are once again being directed at the production of *reality* and the need for more intercultural reflection. Notwithstanding the complexity surrounding the globalised Twenty-First Century ethnographic film, what is clear is that if ethnographers want to develop such enriching techniques they need to move beyond the rhetoric of intercultural participation. By this we mean that they must accept that the filmmaker(s) will lose authority in the film and that authority will tend to get decentralised and shared among subjects. Ways of doing this include allowing subjects to: manage the camera; choose the shots that are used: and, give feedback on the end results. These techniques, not dissimilar to those advocated in other forms of qualitative enquiry, will hopefully create new possibilities for ethnographic film by allowing space for greater equality between, and more reflection by, researchers and participants. [32]

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