

REFLEXIVITY AND FILM: REPRESENTATIONS REVISITED

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”Some ethnographic facts, after all, may be little more than temporary agreements on meaning between anthropologist and informant in a transient relationship, both involved in a liminal mode of communication, which inevitably produces only partial comprehension. (Crick 1992: 176)

Fieldwork is the core experience in the field of anthropology; it's what separates us from the other disciplines of social studies (or at least we like to think so), it's where the researcher is supposed to gather the information (s)he needs to (be able to) produce anthropology, and finally, it's the stuff that myths are made of: The tribe called anthropologists has this initiation ritual which consists of a time of seclusion from one's own kind, a time of trials and tribulations out in the field, *in liminality*, where the socialization (i.e. the academic training) that the apprentice has been put through, is tried out in practice.

Now, the very fieldwork itself, the method one is supposed to use in order to gather information, are one of the themes in anthropology that are most talked about, most written about – but rarely commented on within the genre of visual anthropology itself; that is, many filmmakers have *written* about the controversies one enters as a filmmaker in the field, but rarely does one find *a film about it*. Many students (and other researchers) return from the field with as many questions about their fieldwork as when they left: ‘Did I make the right decision...?’ - ‘Perhaps I should have stopped there, that time when...’ – ‘Did they do it for me, or is that “really” how they do it...’ – ‘He said he didn't mind, but what did he *mean*?’

Produced as a filmic diary of a fieldwork conducted on the island of Tobago, the film “Boys Will Be Boys” (Dale 2002) is a story about how a student struggles with his ambitions, his desire to portray, and the reluctance of the people that he wishes to portray.

It's a story about the meeting, about the fumbling, the searching, the indecisiveness, and finally, the decision not to do any more of the fumbling and the searching, - at least not with a camera. The raw material from the fieldwork consists of (at least) four attempts to start a film based on a particular theme; one centring around a primary public school, another on a young man 'working the beach', a third on the environmental movement (never to be included in the film) and finally, a portrait of a woman in her thirties, a mother of five and craft saleswoman. They all in a sense failed, mostly because I felt as if the people involved felt invaded and uncomfortable with me being there as a filming anthropologist. They would cancel appointments (or simply not show up), they would tell me if I ran into them or sought them out, that this was not a good time, maybe tomorrow, and if any filming was being done, I found that the people I saw in the frame were someone else than the ones I knew, and that I invaded their privacy. Not because I was there (which I had been before and continued to be after I stopped filming), but because I was there filming.

As an article based upon the recording, analyzing and editing of visual material from my fieldwork, I will in the following try to show how it is both intrinsically different from and similar to texts.

Self-presentations and representations – with a camera

I will in the following give two examples of situations, recorded, analyzed and presented via visual means, i.e. a camera, an editing device and a finished film. These examples are unique in the sense that they either would not have happened or would not have caught my interest had it not been for the camera. I wish to elaborate this theme to include a more thorough discussion on the usage of different means of data recording (or data *production*) and its relative importance to my fieldwork, and finally I wish to discuss the relationship between film and text as ethnographic collectors, analysis and representations, with references to some of the discussions that visual anthropologists indulge in.

There are, I believe (at least) two small but poignant scenes in the film where the uniqueness of the camera as a research tool both i) allows for a more thorough

description of the situation, and **ii)** gives an opportunity to re-examine a situation otherwise too complex and/or subtle to grasp instantaneously. Most importantly, I will claim that none of these situations would have even occurred without the camera present; the situations are unfolding *for the camera*, and would have been different – or would not even have taken place – without it. Thus, I want to discuss how bringing a camera to the field changes the way one produces knowledge about ‘the other’ and oneself, but also how it emphasizes difference and symbolizes power relations.

Both hegemonic masculine ideals and other models of masculinity of the Caribbean are present in the film, both directly in the form of presentations-of-self to the camera/filmmaker and indirectly in what is said, both by the protagonists and the filmmaker. I wish to emphasize here the methodological and filmic aspects of the findings. As none of the protagonists were oblivious of them being filmed, of course, the scenes all represent different ways of *performing* for the camera, the cameraman *and* an imagined audience. Thus, they may be regarded as both presentations-of- self, representations of others and *reflections* on one’s own identities.

For the purpose of the analysis, I will here try to describe the scenes in question, but will – as anyone who believes in the multiplicity and complexity of images will appreciate – refer to the film in question (Dale 2002), and wish to emphasize that the focus chosen is one of many possible outtakes from the material; other themes of relevance could be related to tourism, upbringing and musicology and African inheritance, to name but a few.

i) Self-representation as stylized performance

My first example from the film is the self-representation of a man who called himself SugarBlacks, where he ‘portrayed’, imitated’, ‘played’, the role of the typical Caribbean rastaman, on the beach, smoking ganja, under the coconut tree. His portrayal of this ‘typical male’ was very true to many of the ideals and ideas he had about being a man (which also correlated with the expectations of visitors), - he presented himself as free-

spirited and free from other obligations than for himself and his well-being, but still it is also a story about hardship and danger:

Big tune 'bout SugarBlack life story, see, Jah!
Ah gonna tell yuh 'bout me life story, ah, let me tell ya 'bout me life story
Me say I man from Tobago, yuh know me not from Trini
School where me went was the Plymouth AC
Lef' me school Say me went to me che, lef' out me che an' went to CYC
Che me take it was auto body, went of to live in Laventille
Reach a big guy, give me one big 9mm, dem kinda t'ing never fool me
Like dig a hole an' bury-bury, then me go an' look for work in security
Bus' up me gun an' then they fire me
Jump on a plane back a'Bago yuh see
Watch how the life it a flow with Sugee, hard fi work an' hard fi get money
So me take up me craft and start the workin'
And tha' yuh see me (every) mornin' with (my) bag here, so
I'm telling yuh 'bout my life story, from Tobago, not from Trini
Never jump no plane fi go no other country
Jus' (the) other day me end up in London City
(My bro') say: "I good breadwinner me"
And (he) show me the route an' how to do the things in his country
An' dem there kinda t'ings learn me plenty
An' that a little 'bout my life story, it's so sweet, so sweet it's so sweet
Tell'em this here life yuh know, yess it so sweet
Some boys fi take it bad an' some take it neat
This is SugarBlacks me have it down like concrete, 'cause it's sweet...

This self-presentation, made out as a chant, depicts an important image that SugarBlacks wanted to give of himself, as a man with a past, a man who had tried out things, lived other places and felt the hardships of poverty. He managed also to tell his story in such a way that he both underlined his 'coolness' and explained why he was there, at the beach.

He was fired from work in Trinidad, and chose to come back to Tobago, where it is “*hard fi work an’ hard get money*” – but where “*Sugar life is sweet*”. The story might also be interpreted as a tale of the hardships of youth, and that it’s a description of the transitional phase of early manhood, rebellious and carefree, taking place *out there*.

This scene is very much staged, where the protagonist not only controlled what was performed, but also in what environment and to what audience. SugarBlacks insisted on the beach as an ideal spot for ‘the shoot’, but wanted to take us away from the curious eyes of the tourists at the Turtle Beach Hotel. Thus, we ended up in a seclude part of the beach, where no one would disturb us. If this was a concern for me and my needs for good recordings, or him not wanting to be seen as one who was being filmed, I do not know, the main point here simply being that the situation, *because* it was constructed, reveals much about his life and how he wished to present it, and that this information might not have been revealed to me if it wasn’t for my camera. It also revealed his ideas about what I wanted, and thus exemplifies, on another level, the importance of knowledge about the others; knowledge he has gained by living a life *in-between* the local and the global realms.

ii) Self-presentation by letting the camera “watch”

My second example is one where Sherma, a woman selling tourist items on the beach, handcrafted by her husband, is approached in her little shop on the beach (not more than a booth with a roof thatched with palm leaves) by a couple from England, and where a conversation unfolds totally on the premises of the tourists. Sherma later told me that it was a typical conversation, and that she was glad I got it on film: “*Tha’is really how’t is*”. The subtleties of the situation slipped right past me when I was there, but later provided a case in which power relations and arrogance were revealed:

Sherma, Bob and me are talking about literature, about the myth saying that Tobago is Robinson Crusoe’s island. Sherma tells me that Daniel Defoe visited the island and became so fixated by its beauty that he used it as a model when writing about the struggles of a man in involuntary solitude on a desert island. Another factor, she claimed, was that the Caribs populating the island before the

arrival of slaves from Africa was known for their fierce resistance and wildness, ideal models for Defoe's cannibals. While we were talking, I filmed a little on and off, focusing on Sherma. Behind her, that is in front her shop, a couple had appeared, and they started to look through the items displayed. Sherma turned to them, and the conversation went as follows:

S (Sherma): How was your day yesterday?

W (woman): The day was nice, thank you.

S: You had a nice dinner too, last night? No turtle came up?

W: No, we kept turtle watch¹ ... (laughter)

S: Well, probably the turtle said, "You had two of me the night before, so I'm resting tonight.

W: Yes... we had a nice relaxing day yesterday, because our friends went on the island tour, and they were quite exhausted when they came back... (Laughter)

They went to Jemma's Tree House...?

S: Jemma's... yes... in Speyside.

W: They said it was good.

S: Everyone says the food is good... (Pause) I never really go into the restaurant before, but everyone says that it's good, so that's really good to hear...

(Pause in conversation, the couple lifts up some vases, discusses them between them...)

S: It holds water. You can put the dry flowers or the fresh flowers in it... (Another pause, still looking) The sun give a different colour to the bamboo, eh? She loves the palm tree!

W: I liked the palm tree when I first saw it, yes, and I also like the turtle.

S: So when you do make up your mind, I'll give you a nice price, ok?

Sherma sells nothing that day, except the small water cup a friend of hers picked up earlier, the surplus of the day being approximately \$8 US.

Here, a situation unfolded where Sherma wished, in her very subtle way, to depict how her trading with the tourists took place, and to what extent she accommodated their wishes of having someone 'local' to chat with. All topics were focused on their needs, for

a good meal, for relaxation and for memorable experiences and sightings (touring the island is especially popular). Sherma almost never ‘talked down on’ tourists, but let it shine through that there were mechanisms in her everyday life that she was unable to control, which felt unpleasant and at times belittling. She had never been “*into*” the restaurant before, she said, more than hinting at how unrealistic it would be for her to spend that kind of money on a meal. She indulged on the balancing act of offering her merchandize without coming off as pushy, needy or in any other way degrading herself in front of the tourists. They were made to feel welcome, relaxed, as they could buy something if they wanted to.

The impact of tourism is, as already mentioned, becoming more and more profound in local lives, and stories like Sherma’s are prolific. However, this issue will not be analysed here, rather I want to emphasize the importance of having the camera present, both as a recording tool (so that further analysis of the situation could take place afterwards) but also as an initiating factor; Sherma’s remarks to me later indicates that the situation is, to some extent, directed by her, in such a way that it represents ‘how it really is’, to deal with the tourists. She uses a tool for *representation* to *present* an aspect of her life which she found to be important for me to learn something about. In addition, she trusted me with the product of the presentation, the recording, to utilize for my purposes, thus also handing me the responsibility for the analysis which I am presenting here.

In sum, then, what I have done here is to give a few examples of situations that I have entered *with* a camera, where I found it useful – even *necessary* – to take on the role as the filmmaker/researcher. In other situations, this role was impossible to combine with other relations I had built up. This was true in particular with regards to a group of men I call “the barmen”, with whom I shared many late hours over drinks at a local rum shop; a setting which – with its total absence of tourists and where nostalgia and authenticity in many ways prevailed in peoples minds – would simply be impossible to enter with a camera.

I wanted to edit my material in such a way that the anxieties and mistakes made by the filmmaker comes through. I wanted to show what others cut out; the small talk before and after ‘the real shoot’, the fumbling questions asked from behind the camera, the many

new faces, imagined to be the protagonist in yet another filmed narrative. Telling the story of the storyteller I believe will help in understanding the analytical point of view the material has been analysed from, and that this - together with a focus on a situational analysis of data - has helped me shape the methodological ideals which I wish to be true to.

Even though there are few *anthropological* films produced on the tribulations of fieldwork – from a methodological point of view, I still believe my film follows a tradition (one of many) within the realm of *documentary filmmaking*; that of telling the tale of the filmmaker as well as that of 'the others'. I wish to briefly mention two films, Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch' "Cronicle of a Summer (1961) and Kim McKenzie and Les Hiatt's "Waiting for Harry" (1980), as examples of different reflexive approaches to filmmaking. Different in both main topic (young peoples lives in a modern metropolis vs. preparations and the implementation of a funeral ceremony amongst Australian aboriginies) and in relative importance within the '*subculture of Visual Anthropology*', they both focus on the filmmaker's participation in the stories and on their aims in making the film. In "Cronicle of a Summer" we are introduced to the film through a discussion between Rouch and Morin on what the film should be about, and all through the film we see the filmmakers as initiators in the social scenarios unfolding. In "Waiting for Harry" the anthropologist, Les Hiatt, is invited to the funeral of one of his main informants from his 20-odd years of working with the Anbarra people of Northern Australia. He is indeed part of the story, as his participation as an initiated brother of the deceased is required for the ceremony to take place. Now, as they wait for Harry, another important funeral guest, the anthropologist becomes one of the most important *protagonists* of the story, as he impatiently drives the processes of preparation forward. Finally, he gets into his car and goes to fetch Harry himself.

As two of remarkably few examples of an explicit reflexivity *in the film itself*, they may methodologically be seen as what MacDougall (1998d) has described as *participatory* filmmaking as opposed to, or rather as a qualitative refocusing of the classic approach of *observational* filmmaking:

”Here the filmmaker acknowledges his or her entry upon the world as subjects and yet asks them to imprint directly upon the film aspects of their own culture. ...by revealing their role, filmmakers enhance the value of the material as evidence. By entering actively into the world of their subjects, they can provoke a greater flow of information about them (ibid: 134)

This approach to filmmaking is synchronous with the reflexive turn in anthropology, which was a reaction towards stereotypical representations of others based on an idea about ‘having been there’ as the only criteria for writing up objective truths about ‘the others’, and reveals a more thorough, epistemological awareness of the way knowledge *with a camera* is produced. My experience is that even though there are major differences in possibilities *with* vs. *without* a camera in the field, and even though there are different information to be gathered from these two approaches, there are some fundamental goals and guidelines which both the ethnographer-with-a-pen and the ethnographer-with-a-camera refers to. Either they both strive to *represent* their protagonists in a respectful and understandable manner, and have a desire to learn something which they didn’t know before and indulge in searching for narratives which may help them in illuminating their field experience. Or they don’t. Camera or no camera. It’s *how you use your tool* that matters most.

In telling the stories of others, one constantly runs the risk of objectifying the one’s the story is about. The dilemma lies deep within anthropology itself, or rather in the goals of anthropology to tell the *small stories* from small places *and* to do research in such a way that one might generalize about the larger structures of human existence. It’s the struggle between universal science and the post-modernist view – much to the credit of the feminist movement within such disciplines as anthropology – that has helped produce the understanding that every representation of systems of knowledge has to be situated locally and understood “*through the prisms of the local*” (Miller 1995). One of the profound impacts the feminists has made on social science, is that when one wants to understand something about a set of individuals, actors, social beings, whatever one likes to call them, one has to make sure that they are not objectified or muted, but rather that their situated knowledge is made explicit and that other stories thus are being told.

The question is not whether there *might* be a distance in anthropological representations, but in what way this distancing is necessary for the stranger – the anthropologist – to understand what he/she has been facing, and how he/she should interpret the experiences, guided by both a mode of reflexivity and one's own preconceptions. The point should *not* be to 'go native', but rather to explicitly describe it as the result(s) of the meeting(s) between people from different settings. These meetings initiate the processes which we call social life, often incomprehensible unless one walks up real close to it, but also impossible to interpret from an 'objective' distance. Like it or not, the anthropologist is a participant in social life, wherever he/she might be.

3.5. Film-or-text or film-and-text?

"In order to be intelligible and explanatory (or articulate) film has to distance itself from its intrinsic presence ... writing, on the other hand, wrestles with its intrinsic 'absence'" (Crawford 1992:70)

As research tools, analytical tools and representational modes, both the written text and the film (or still photography) have qualities which are useful in portraying local life as ethnography. When moving images first was put to use as a tool for representing anthropological knowledge, many felt that they had acquired the perfect, tool for gathering objective data on social life without too much interference from the researcher her/himself. Just like a camera could record what went on during an experiment in a laboratory, one imagined that the same equipment, when put on a tripod for a long period of time, could gather objective evidence also from 'the human laboratory', actual social life. The idea was that this tool, to a large extent, will be capable of gathering objective data, at least if it's left alone, and that it shouldn't be tampered with nor controlled by the anthropologist/filmmaker. A response to this kind of objectivism was that this way of gathering information really was useless, and that a film based on this kind of material would be impossible to understand, without anything to tell (Mead and Bateson: 1976). The difference between these views lies in a sense in the understanding of filmmaking as

a creative process, and filmmakers like Jean Rouch and John Marshall wanted to be in control of the camera, and use it in order to retrieve what *they* sensed was happening. They aimed at showing how human actions can be discovered and understood, and that it was only through one's own humanity and knowledgeable insight that one would be able to tell a story which made sense for viewers. A camera can be used in both ways, just as words can be used both for simplified recording of raw data and for structured narratives. But on a tripod, unmanipulated, the camera is reduced to collecting quantitative data (and poor ones, as well, as any number of interesting things might happen outside of the oblivious framing), and thus is no longer useful as a tool with which one can represent the social life one is studying. On the other hand, manipulative usage of the camera may also make bad representations.

Peter I. Crawford writes in his article on ethnography as text and film (1992) that the so-called crisis in representation has been of a major importance for the development of visual anthropology. Still, he claims that the divide often drawn between written and filmed anthropology should not be equated with the (almost absolute) divide between words and images. He reminds us that film is more than images, just as texts are more than mere words (ibid: 66). Neither knowledge nor nonsense is bound to any specific form of representation. Instead of gabbling with an endless discussion of form, one should focus on how they will both appear as *products of the anthropological discourse*, as media to which one must 'translate' culture. One may claim, like Hastrup (1992: p. 14), that the two forms of media have different *kinds* (not levels!) of accuracy, and are thus mediators of *different sorts of information*, which are the basis for different representations. I believe that there's a need for a stronger emphasis from the "sub-culture" of visual anthropology on methodological but also analytical and theoretical works, how images are analyzed, how stories are told, and – most importantly – how it *both* resembles *and* differ from written texts, and that both text and film would benefit greatly from the intrinsic value of the other. Both forms of representation are linear; they are based on narratives from an embodied experience, and as such are mere replicas of the actual encounters which they are supposed to describe. Further, they are both analyzed at a distance, text by using analytical terms and models which are then

transcribed onto paper by the use of a specific *language*, film by using the same (or a set of equivalent) analytical terms and models which are then transcribed onto *film* (or video, DVD or a hard drive) by the use of a specific *technique* - editing. The starting point is remarkably similar, the process likewise. So what about the product, the results? Are they as similar, or are there indeed intrinsic values in letters and sentences *per se* which makes them more *scientific* than film? Within the realm of visual anthropology itself, the opinions differ, from (still) praising the camera's ability to record something more "truthful" to quite the opposite, that there are indeed limitations to what science can describe, and that film in many ways exceeds these limitations, and thus in this sense succumbs to the rules and identifiable traits of art.²

As one of the strongest spokespersons for an anthropology of the visual, Jay Ruby (2000) calls for a more thorough linkage of the works of the visual anthropologists to the emergence of a theoretical framework from which *all* anthropologists may seek to find useful tools for the production of ethnography. He openly admits that

"...ethnographic filmmakers fail to pursue the anthropological implications of their work, often because they seek their validation from the film world or the ghetto' of ethnographic film festivals and not among (cultural) anthropologists (*my parentheses*)" (p.264).

The question of whether the production of visual ethnography might rise from it's current standing within anthropology - from being regarded as a mere educational tool towards contributing to the process of producing a framework for analysis within the discipline - will depend, I believe, upon the efforts of both parties; whilst anthropological filmmakers strive to incorporate into their work the kind of analytical distinctiveness and theoretical relevance required by *any* scientific work, the community of "non-visual" anthropologists must open up for a medium which has been utilized for many years in recording, analyzing and representing – not a perceived, objectifiable truth, but a *reflexive process of interaction*:

”In the field, the observer modifies himself; in doing his work he is no longer simply someone who greets the elders at the edge of the village, but – to go back to Vertovian terminology – he ethno-looks, ethno-observes, ethno-thinks. And those with whom he deals are similarly modified; in giving their confidence to this habitual foreign visitor, they ethno-show, ethno-speak, ethno-think. It is this permanent ethno-dialogue that appears to be one of the most interesting angles in the current progress of ethnography.” (Rouch 2003(1973): p.100-101)

In this respect, and in light of the current understanding of the importance of situating the fieldworker in the ethnography, visual tools might yet prove scientific after all.

Notes:

¹ 'Turtle watch' meaning simply to be put on a list of who's to be awakened if a turtle is spotted, all organized for the convenience of the visitor...

² I am most grateful to Peter I. Crawford for introducing me to these ideas, first brought forward during a Doctoral dispute at the University of Tromsø, then elaborated during personal discussions.

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