UDC 791.43:39

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"MAKING AND PRESENTING" ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS: PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Abstract: In the following essay the authors discuss visual anthropology based upon their own experiences with ethnographic films. Through the analysis of their work they are thinking about visual representations that are created through the process of making and presenting different visual materials. Both processes include important ethical issues, as well as other problems that we face when using methods of visual anthropology.

Key words: Visual anthropology, ethnographic film, ethics, presentation, analysis, visual material.

The tricks of visual anthropology

Visual anthropology as a method of gathering and presenting cultural material has many different consequences. Especially it raises a lot of questions of responsibility and ethics due to the fact that when we're presenting a person through visual media, the individual that was before able to stay anonymous now becomes a person "with a face" and his or her personal story and intimacy are revealed. Even if we as anthropologist try to avoid harming people that are part of our research in any way, we cannot predict what will happen to "our story" once the movie is shown to the viewers, how can it be (*mis*)used and how it will affect the audience (Heider 1976: 120). In the following article we try to reflect or analyse our personal experience with the processes of making and also presenting ethnographic films.[1] It is not only a problem of films but also the usage of (photo) camera that in a way always invades one's personal space and exposes the person's privacy to a broader audience. The process of filming and editing puts the ethnographer in the position of power, but yet it always leaves him or her with personal ethical dilemmas. This reflexive turn is crucial for this kind of work regardless of the anthropological background. If we just look at travelling for instance, where we can quickly find ourselves in the position of taking pictures of the local people or searching for "exotics" and stereotypes of the culture we're visiting. A lot of times we can see other people (or even ourselves) taking

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[1]   Manca Filak is the author of ethnographic film *I will carry you to the seaside* (2012) and Žiga Gorišek is the author of *Push Bura: What do you think of life in Ilirska Bistrica 1996-2011 (2011)*. Our first common project is the ethnographic film *Captain and his Friday* (2013). In this article we analyse mainly the film *I will carry you to the seaside* that is a subtle presentation of partnership and life of *Nina* with cerebral palsy; and *Captain and his Friday* that shows a day of an old couple, doyen of Sailing in Slovenia and his partner.

pictures of "the locals"[2] behind their back and pretending we're taking picture of the architecture or something similar to that. In the same way, Susan Sontag argues that as we're searching for perfect pictures, we are imposing standards on the people we portrait and if they're not conforming to these standard it means that they're not authentic enough (de Laat 2004: 132). Nevertheless, visual presentations should primarily be made out of ethnographic understanding even though that is not always the most filmic or aesthetic case (Heider 1976: 125).

Ethnographic film

"Filming is the only method I have to show the other how I see him"- Jean Rouch.
Before we start to analyse our work we come to the question why we can call our visual representations[3] ethnographical, how much *ethnographical* is there in them and if ethnographic film is the only way to conduct our research. There is a lot of assumptions that visual anthropology is specialized only for video (ethnographic films) or photography when in reality its field of study is much larger than just the production of visual material because it includes also the analysis of photography, art, material culture as well as researching body expressions (Banks and Morphy, 1999: 4; Ruby 2005: 160; de Laat 2004: 125). Photographs, films and videos can either serve as means of noting and preserving visual data or to discover visual data and the way of its construction (Križnar 2005: 334).

We can divide the mainstream of visual anthropology into three parts: shooting for researcher's own use (study, archive), shooting for communication with people we research and shooting for communication with broader audience, where we find ethnographic films (Križnar 2009: 132). Ethnographic film, as the most known "product" of visual anthropology can be at the same time an instrument of research and a medium for presentation of culture and scientific findings (Križnar 2005: 337). We can find many theoretical conflicts between two strategies of understanding and experiencing ethnographic films. Objective scientific approach understands visual anthropology as a science, while aesthetic, subjective approach is more in domain of fiction film and art (Mustać 2012: 2). We can find similar conflict when we try to define the line between documentary and ethnographic films. Behind the beginning of any documentary film is a written story or script, while ethnographic film takes another way. In the real cultural environment we search for a story that is already part of this reality (Križnar 2009: 132; see also Mustać 2012: 2). We search for the story in the images of culture that we put into the medium (photography, film) but the documentary film uses images of culture to

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[2]   The remarks are referring to the personal experiences we've had, especially in the Balkans and in India. Many times you can see people taking pictures of Muslim women or some traditional *sadui* in India behind their back.

[3]   "Visual representations" is a broader term that includes also visual ethnographies (ethnographic film, 'ethnophotography', digital multimedia…) but even though "visual ethnographies are also visual representations; visual representations are not always visual ethnographies" (de Laat 2004: 125). The term visual representation proceeds from the idea that the culture is manifested in our natural and social environment (Ruby 2005: 165).

create its own story of that culture (Križnar 2005: 338). The main method used in (visual) anthropology is observational and the way of visual presentation is leaning towards realism, that's why the outcomes are called "observational realism"(Križnar 2009: 132). Even with this division, *ethnographic* as an adjective is many times misused and ascribed to social documentaries that include footages of some aspect of exotic cultures (Ruby 2005: 161).

Visual representations are related to but cannot be replaceable with words (Pink 2007: 6; O'Reilly 2009: 225; Ruby 2005: 160-161; MacDougall 1997: 285). The distinction between image-producing and "writing anthropology" became one of the main discourses within anthropology in the last fifty years and it's seen by many authors as problematic. Sarah Pink suggests that the inclusion of visual methods should be made when the situation seems appropriate to generate the knowledge and research questions we are looking for through the usage of visual methods (2007: 250). She proposes a "new" ethnographic method *walking with camera* which allows researcher to empathically understand how research participants experience, tell and show their social environments in their own personally specific ways (Pink 2007: 246-250). This kind of method we also used in our film *Captain and his Friday* where we were walking with our participants through the city of Piran. This sensory approach showed us what was important to" our old couple" (market place, the main square, benches or stairs where they can rest, etc.) and how other locals perceive them (sometimes even like a tourist attraction). In any way visual anthropology shouldn't and cannot be a substitute of writing anthropology and it should develop its own alternative goals and methodology that will benefit to anthropology as a whole (MacDougall 1997: 285; Schneider, Wright 2006: 23). Precisely the passage into different communication system (from anthropology of words) is a challenge to (new) visual anthropology.

"The making of"

Ethnographic filming never includes only the process of shooting, but is always escorted with the need of financial resources, time, money, preparations, technical issues and organization. To be an anthropologist and filmmaker in the same person is a hard task to follow in order that the film is also good quality (Heider 1976: 126). On the other hand, according to Margaret Mead, the best work is made when anthropologist and filmmaker coincide in one person, even though the interests and experiences can be many time contradictive (2003: 7).

The development of visual anthropology goes hand in hand with the changes in theoretical paradigms and the development of technology (MacDougall 2001: 15). In the past the filming and editing was more connected to teamwork and dependent on the budget of the foundations and televisions, when today due to an easily accessible technology almost anybody can make a film basically at home. This change, nevertheless, brought the responsibility back to the author, anthropologist; the filmmaker. David MacDougall sees the independence of traditional sources of financing for ethnographic movies as one of the most revolutionary changes in the development of the discipline (2001: 15-17). In this context he thinks that individual shooting brought ethnographic films closer to personal approach. Since you are filming by yourself it is much easier to establish

intimate and personal relations with your research participants. On the other hand this approach encompasses a lot of freedom of expression as well as risk, since we have to be aware of all the technical issues and, at the same time, responsible for ourselves and the outcome (MacDougall 2001: 17; see also Križnar 2009: 133).

In ethnographic writing, researcher can at least physically hide himself behind the story even though subjectivity probably cannot be avoided. But during the filming it is sometimes hard to become invisible (referring mostly to individual or small-groups projects). You can either be present with your voice behind the camera or people you film refer to you during the interviews. In the film *Captain and his Friday* it was almost impossible to shoot a scene without one of us being physically or verbally present in the tapes with protagonists. But since we didn't try to intervene in the daily routine of sailor *Mirko* and his partner *Savina*, we let them to lead their story that in the end involved us more than we first expected. The important aspect of the making process is contextualization (of the story, landscape, physical surroundings, etc.) or at least certain amount of it that always depends on individual judgment. It is important to follow the phenomena in their cultural context, where principals of ethnographic film follow Heider's idea of showing *whole bodies and whole acts* (Mustać 2012: 6; Križnar 2009: 132). Some authors believe that the incorporation of ethnographer or/and filmmaker enables more results, plus it reveals the obvious fact that the filmmaker influences the behaviour and the results of the ethnographic process (Mustać 2012: 7-8; Heider 1976: 64-69). The inclusion of ethnographer also personalizes the mediation between the culture and the public because it enables the understanding of the relationship between the authors and protagonists and does not make the person we film an *object*. It is hard to predict what will happen during the fieldwork and it is even harder when you lose a lot of visual material because of unexpected situations where you as anthropologist become part of the scene. When writing you can at least avoid this issue when in filming you can edit the material to one point but cannot "fix" everything afterwards. During the filming of *Captain and his Friday* we couldn't shoot all the time because we were both part of the activities of our protagonists, we were asked to help with cooking, sailing, cleaning, etc. Beside that their age contributed to the concerns over security at sailing.[4] When filming *I will carry you to the seaside* it was also hard to shoot every scene because you had to help with the wheel chair or a lot of tapes were not useful at the end because you were mentioned or involved in the scene. It is hard to avoid the obvious fact that you are behind the camera and that you have some kind of relationship with the people you film and that you affect the scenes, interviews and the story line. In any case, ethnographic film is not objective in the sense of rough ethnographic visual material, but is already its analysis and in a way, like Balikci named it "subconscious ideological manipulation of anthropologist" (Križnar 1996: 114). But we still want to avoid this manipulation as much as it's possible to come to the most truthful outcome. We have to be careful though that we don't come to artist's position of manipulating reality in order to create some kind of "higher truth" where the end would justify the means (Heider 1976: 11).

When we edit our ethnographic material we have to be very careful because with editing we introduce a new subjective reality. The excessive use of editing (with scenes

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[4]   For better understanding, *Mirko* is 97 and *Savina* is 84 years old.

from natural environment) that tries to show the duration of one day, even though it didn't actually happen in a day can lead to loosing the legitimacy of film and *ethnographic* in them, avoiding the holistic approach intentionally to bring the film closer to public (Mustać 2012: 6-7). Still, the purpose of editing is to emphasize the narration of the film and not to (de)construct it. In *I will carry you to the seaside*, close-ups of body are used several times which makes *Nina*'s body and her intimacy more close to the viewer than it would in real life. It breaks the restraints of social distance and combines intimacy on one and spectacle on the other side (Macdougall 2006: 21). Križnar asks himself if the hyper intimate closeness of some visual products is not a substitute for former visual presentations of exotic cultures in ethnographic movies (2009: 138). Still it depends on the personal judgment and specific context of the film. In *I will carry you to the seaside* the intimacy that is shown in the film and actually prevails in it, was possible due to the family relations of the protagonist and filmmaker. Still, the process of filming and presenting the final work was even harder due to this relationship, because it brought a lot of responsibility and emotional attachment to the work. In the end we can say that visual representations and ethnographies are *creating* more than representing cultures or better said, the representations are already constructions, representations "of *a* reality" and not "*the* reality" itself (de Laat 2004: 133, 138). Film without any point of view is not possible, because every process of selection, inclusion and exclusion of visual material, choice of angle and object of filming is already picking a certain perspective (Mustać 2012: 5, see also Heider 1976).

Another important question of ethnographic film is picking the right method, which is many times hard to do as well as it is hard to say that visual methods are appropriate for all occasions and contexts (Pink 2006a: 40). The decision regarding which visual methods we'll choose have to be done before we conduct fieldwork and with that also technical, legal and study preparations and plan of filming (Pink 2006a: 40, 47).

According to Banks we can divide visual methods into three parts:
1. the making of visual material (studying one society through the production of photographs),
2. the study of visual material (studying material for collecting information about society),
3. cooperation with participant in our visual research (Pink 2006: 41).

As we can see, there is many different ways, methods and approaches[5] to do visual representations. It is the decision of the anthropologist or filmmaker which way to choose and it also depends on the situation on the field that is many times unpredictable. MacDougall counts three different roles of camera: it can be responsive (interprets without disturbing or provoking), interactive (where we can see the relationship between researcher and the subject) and constructive (interprets the continent with deconstructing it to smaller parts to create something new) (Križnar 2009: 133). Through our work we came from trying to hide our (physical) presence as much as possible, to openly include it into the final product. From *I will carry you to the seaside* that is balancing between interactive and responsive usage of camera and uses the observational method, to film *Captain and his Friday* that is using participatory approach and interactive camera.

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[5]   Naško Križnar lists two, observational and participatory (2009: 133).

When you are doing fieldwork there is special reciprocal relationship between the anthropologist and the participant of research. Both of them are living the same situation, "the observer is observed and the observed is observer" (Križnar 1996: 112). More than in praxis, the participatory method should live like a humanistic *idea[l]* of collaboration between researcher and people on the field, where visual representation (visual material, ethnographic film, etc.) are the result of human relationships (Križnar 1996: 112).

Ethical considerations

If we again ask ourselves about the truth or untruth we are showing in visual representations we have to be aware that when we enter the narrative of ethnographic film, the experience is contextualized and created for us (MacDougall 1997: 289). With this awareness many ethical considerations arouse. Visual ethnography gives as a chance to see the world we study in a new way, because it enables us to concentrate on the sensual part and emotions, due to different ways of presenting visual products through new digital media (O'Reilly 2009: 221). But when we are presenting and making visual material we are confronted with the questions of anonymity (and the lack of it), responsibility, social rights, authorship, technical and ethical challenges etc. (Perry, Marion 2010: 414; O'Reilly 2009: 222; see also Pink 2006a).

We have to be aware of the importance of morality as a discourse, which is not static, in fact it is ever emergent, produced from change and as such it can always lead to something new (Laidlaw 2002: 317). The concept of ethical in visual anthropology changed through history from the goal of creating a scientific database, archive of images in the end of 19th century to the beginning of the questioning the influence of researcher on visual representations (de Laat 2004: 126-7; see also Banks, Morphy 1997: 7-12). It was contemporaries of Margaret Mead and John Collier (like John Marshall, Jean Rouch, Sarah Elder, Robert Gardner, Leonard Kamerling) that began with experimenting with different techniques that would include the voice of the colonized, like *cinéma vérité*, *multivocality*, reflexivity and collaboration (de Laat 2004: 128). One of the pioneers of this new approaches are Robert J. Flaherty with his movie *Nanook of the North* (1922) and Dziga Vertov with his "experimental movie" *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) that was made without any scenario (Banks, Morphy 1997: 9). The stories were typically descriptive and not narrative. In the "Kino Pravda" series, Vertov focused on everyday experiences in places like bars, schools, marketplaces, etc. His film theory from "Kino Pravda" was later adopted by many, like Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin and others, who coined the new term *cinéma vérité* (Himpele, Ginsburg 2005). Jean Rouch continued to be concerned with Vertov's ideas of reflexivity and the construction of filmic truth (Ruby 2005a: 111), and strived to break the boundary between filmmaker and subject through concepts such as "shared anthropology" (by which ethnographer and subject are put on equal footing), feedback (by which the filmmaker shows the footage to his subjects and seeks their input), and provocation (by which the filmmaker and his camera act as catalysts that participate in and even precipitate the action)" (Rubin, 2013). During our ethnographic work we always try to follow some of these basic concepts. For example in the movie *Push Bura* (2011) similar experiment was made like in the Rouch's and Morin's film *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), where they were asking people on the streets

of Paris if they feel happy (Bauch 2005-2009). This experiment was similarly repeated in the city of Ilirska Bistrica, where people were asked what they think about life in Ilirska Bistrica. The film was later presented in the same town and with the presentation people started to discuss about similarly negative opinion about the life in the city. The response of the audience could be interesting for further investigation.

When we are conducting ethnography we have a moral obligation towards our informants that give us information in a good faith that it won't do them any harm (Muršič 2009: 72). The first ethical decision should then be if we should even collect specific information at all, and if we do, we are responsible for what will happen with them afterwards (Muršič 2009: 72; Pink 2006: 43-5). We have to (re)ask ourselves at different stages of our research if the material will be suitable to our participants and to their culture. We shouldn't take ethics as a burden or a barrier of a research but as something that is integral part of our work (de Laat 2004: 122). Ethical decisions are individual decisions that lean on personal and professional beliefs that are embodied into specific research context of the ethnographer (Pink 2006: 49-50). They are also connected with the epistemology of academic disciplines, therefore with theory and methodology (Pink 2006: 50). With all the changes in technology, the concept of ethics is also changing. Most of the literature in visual anthropology includes at least one chapter of ethical questions which is a reflection of the questioning of the process of gathering or studying visual material (permissions, confidentiality, risks, expectations, ownership etc.) (Pink 2006: 49). In 2009 there was a meeting of American Anthropological Association (AAA), where the visual ethics was questioned and discussed (Perry, Marion, 2010: 410). AAA's Code of Ethics from 2009 states that our research shouldn't in any way threaten or harm the people we study, which should be our primary obligation. The problem is though that ethical dilemmas and situations that cause them are not static but always there in different disguise (de Laat 2004: 124). Three questions emerge as a conclusion: are ethical visual representations possible, what makes one visual representation an ethical one, and are truly ethical representations possible (de Laat 2004: 130)? Truly ethical visual products are probably not possible; as well as avoiding any kind of harm does not mean also to please everyone (de Laat 2004: 131). Ignorance shouldn't yield to responsibility, even though causing *harm* means different things to different cultures (de Laat 2004: 135). We always have to be sincere with the ones we photograph or record and let them know about our intentions with the visual material (Pink 2006: 55). In the praxis the ethic is related to many different aspects and to the relation of power between ethnographer, informants, experts, sponsors, media and other institutions.[6] It is not merely the adherence to all theses requirements but also about the development of the sense of understanding of ethical contexts of the fieldwork that might enrich the anthropological understanding of human conduct (Pink 2006: 32, 49; Laidlaw 2002: 315).

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[6] The ethnographer with his or her work normally gets something in return, if nothing else, at least a symbolic status. On the other side it is not necessary for the participants to get anything in return (Pink 2006: 57). Still, the question of payment shouldn't be ignored. Even though it can lead to unbalance in the community, reciprocity is a moral duty to keep in mind (de Laat 2004: 143). A good example of giving something in return is giving the copies of your product to your participants in the research (Pink 2006: 57).

Presenting the visual products

According to MacDougall, the problem of visual image can be seen in the fact that it shows everything and yet remains 'annoyingly mute' (1997: 277). We can say that the problem of ethnographic film or visual material is also the inability to predict how a film as a whole will influence a diverse audience, what questions and debates it will arise, and what emotions will be evoked. Once we present our work publically, we don't have the control over presentation or interpretation of our work (Pink 2006a: 56). Being aware of this fact, the process of presenting one's work includes a lot of anxiety and worries about the acceptance, and especially the interpretation of the audience. When we were presenting *I will carry you to the seaside* on the Days of Ethnographic films in Ljubljana (March, 2013) where the participants of the film were also present, we faced a very emotional reaction of the people as well as the protagonists. Handling all the emotions of a big crowd was an immense challenge when we had to talk about the topic and our work. As we said, many questions of harming people (and their reputation) arouse only after the publication of material is done (Pink 2006a: 56). Still, we believe that it is crucial to present your work in order to make it "alive" by enabling other people to see it, discuss about it and criticize it. The best way to do that at least for anthropological circles is through ethnographic film festivals[7] or public presentations through social networks. The presentation is the decision of every individual and his responsibility as well as it depends on the theme of the film. As anthropologists, we have the opportunity to communicate across different disciplines and cultures (Pink 2006: 100). Presentation can also be a good social intervention, a way of activism, if it opens debates of *controversial* or *taboo* topics. The film *I will carry you to the seaside* was a good example of how one topic like intimate love relationship of the protagonists *Nina* and *Domen* can open so many conversations, questions, tears and emotions. Especially people were surprised to see this kind of relationship in "real life", with intimate, realistic video scenes. What is the most important is also the fact, that now this film is not being presented by the author but by the protagonists themselves – they are the one that use it as a social action to make people more open and tolerant and to make them realize that we can have different kind of love, body, intimacy, relationships and that society is the one that determines what kind of body or love is "normal". Still, when making ethnographic films we shouldn't be mislead to the assumption that showing positive image of some culture or topic to people will have a "humanizing effect" that will lead to improving tolerance and difference (Ruby 2005: 161).

The future of visual anthropology

"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are" - Anaïs Nin.

Times when anthropology was mostly the discipline of words and pen, when notebook and questionnaires were the highest equipment of our discipline, are now over (Mead 2003: 5). (Photo) camera and Dictaphone are becoming an obligatory accessory

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[7]   Look for festivals on *CAFFE* (Coordinating Anthropological Film Festivals in Europe) or *Visualanthropology.net.*

of every anthropologist. With the development of technology and the fact that technology is becoming our everyday reality, we should follow the trends. That also means that we have to present our work not just by publishing books, articles and researches, but present our work in the (visual) media. While digital technology is becoming more and more interesting and wide used, visual anthropology, once marginal activity in the discipline, has similarly "come into its own" (Ruby 2005: 168).

The feeling of holding the camera and filming for the first time instead of using Dictaphone or notebook is hard to describe. It is even harder to pretend "you're not there" as it is when we're doing usual fieldwork without filming. And at the end, why should we even pretend? The result of any fieldwork (with our without visual methods) is the result of the relationship of anthropologist and the participants of our research. The quality of this relationship is always seen in your work. According to Asen Balikci, film is a subjective construct that allows the filmmaker the freedom of creating in every part of the making process and is there for the author's *interpretation of the visible* (Mead 2003: 184). Visual representations are always created and not taken and even though ethnography and cinematic apparatus can trace the moments of truth; this truth will always be partial (de Laat 2004; Mustać, 2012: 9). Besides that, it leaves us with a lot of ethical dilemmas concerning anonymity, responsibility and similar. But there is fortunately also the "other side of the coin", where (visual) anthropology can bring hidden issues into public and hence has the opportunity to create social interventions that would improve people's existence (Pink 2006: 81). Sarah Pink suggests that visual anthropology shouldn't be just a sub discipline that focuses on visual research methods; the study of the visual and visual representation but it should also use the visual as a tool of social intervention (2006: 82). Schneider and Wright also think that anthropology should follow contemporary art in the styles, presentation of fragments so that there a discussion would be open about different ways of showing one's experience, not just through texts that often encompass forced conclusions (2010: 20). Maybe in this time, when art is becoming more and more extreme in its (shocking) images that aim to surprise and activate the viewer, anthropology as well needs new approaches and ideas of presenting "the Other". For the future we should develop ways of integrating written texts and visual material in order to provide deeper cultural and analytical contextualization, that make communication about other people's experiences possible" (2007: 251).

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