

Imagining Rurality: Portuguese Documentary and Ethnographic Film in the 1960s and 1990s

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Abstract

As a Portuguese anthropologist and documentary filmmaker, I would like to reflect in this paper on the ethnographic documentary (both academic and creative) in two important periods of the Portuguese contemporary history, and its relation with the representation of national identity. The paper will reflect on the issue of ethnographic film definition as a style and a theoretical instrument in the field of Portuguese visual anthropology. I will try to summarize issues about the relations between institutionalized anthropology (museological experiments) and the documentary cinema in Portugal. The sixties and the years of the 1974 revolution are in this presentation a reference to understand how the country and specially the rural areas and the figure of the peasant were represented. We would then look retrospectively to what happened in the 1990's years with the attempt from the documentary film to look at ethnographic issues like the post-colonialism, ethnic minorities and the urban life.

I'm going to talk about Portuguese documentary film with an ethnographic perspective in its links with the representation of national identity. I start from the idea that this kind of film produces a discourse about Portuguese popular culture, an idea of the country or *the memory of the country*, whose homogeneity I will question. The first large corpus of ethnographic documentaries came about with what we call the "*Cinema Novo*" and afterwards with film associated with the April 25th Revolution. I would like to look at what happened later, from 1994 onwards, with a new wave of films (where I include my own work as a documentarist) that look at topics such as multiculturalism, post-colonialism or urban life.

During my talk, I will show a number of excerpts from films that seek to open up ways to debate theoretical and methodological questions, such as: How to work from these images? How to construct sets of images that form a body in which we may find recurrences? As I searched the images that were made in my country, I kept finding this construction of an idea of the common people, the collective people, to the detriment of an idea of the individual. I also kept finding a rural Portugal that was archaic, closed within itself and sad. How to turn the construction of that idea of the common people in the images into an object of study? These questions are, for me, the starting point of the research work that I've recently begun and will not be fully answered here today.

This is the first talk I give within the framework of my doctoral project, which is on ethnographic documentary film and its link to representations of rural popular culture. I would like it to be as much a contribution to Portuguese anthropology as to film history by straddling the two disciplines in what is termed *visual anthropology* in the broadest sense of the term, understood here as the study of image production in different cultures (cf. Banks and Morphy, 1997).

Recent literature in Portuguese anthropology has focused on popular culture in its relation to processes of objectifying the common people and their traditions, as well as to forms of national or regional identity representation. However, most research work on the representation of popular culture in Portugal is based on written texts and not on moving images and sound. With my project, which I've called "*Film Peasants*", I intend to carry out a thorough examination of material that has been very little studied in Portugal, that is to say, ethnographic film.

As I said at the start of my talk, I belong to a generation of Portuguese documentary filmmakers who in the mid-1990s brought back this film genre, one that seems to have fallen into a deep sleep in Portugal. We know that documentaries were re-emerging at this time all over Europe, but why had it been lying dormant? What had happened to the revolutionary documentary filmmaking of my childhood? Why did Portuguese filmmaking seem so distant from any documentary approach and was increasingly following the path of what José Manuel Costa called a *film-poetry* tradition, which had sprung from a *realist* base? He went even further and argued that this film genre did not exist in Portugal in the sense of "a movement, even if little expressive or temporary, that was consistently committed to the genre and had kept up a dialogue with the genre's more robust phases" (Costa, 2004:120).

The first question I asked myself was how to define the period I wanted to work on. Some studies have been made in literature on Portuguese film into the relation between cinema and national identity. These studies are basically about fiction film, but they are important for they help me find a chronology that defines – for reasons I lack the time to explain now – an important period in Portuguese film, that between 1962 and 1982. I believe that we can find here a representation of the common people as an aesthetically qualified and valued universe, regardless of the exact film category it falls under (documentary, ethnographic film, fiction, etc.).

By viewing these films and questioning the images, I seek to understand the fixation films had in rurality, traditions, roots and authenticity. I want to find the link with ideas that run through the history of Portuguese anthropology and to ask in what way we can say Portuguese ethnographic film exists.

With these temporary goal posts thus defined, I will start by identifying four large cinematographic bodies of work. First, films made by anthropologists, such as Jorge Dias and his colleagues,

who founded modern Portuguese ethnology and the Museum of Ethnology. Second, the work of filmmakers who filmed peasants and their folkways in a documentary form and, above all, the explosion of films in the wake of the April 25th Revolution. Third, fiction films in which issues dealing with popular culture prevail as references. Finally, I also consider the possibility of working with a number of amateur films, generally made by an intellectual elite who in the 1970s looked on film as a means to carry out some local ethnography. Though it was amateur and marginal as filmmaking, I believe we will find it has a close relationship with the other three bodies of work.

I thus leave out mainstream films produced during Salazar's dictatorship and concentrate on what was produced on the margins, mainly left-wing incursions into popular culture. It is interesting to look for the moment of change in amateur filmmaking in the 1960s and what this represents; to understand the social and ideological context of that generation; to explore the discourse of the time as to popular culture; explore the relation of film with popular art and collecting objects; address the relation between the artistic avant-garde and popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, in this talk I will only deal with the first two groups of films as I will leave out fiction and amateur films and focus on the documentary. The first group of material is a number of ethnographic films (I shall show you excerpts) made by Jorge Dias' team, one that Veiga de Oliveira would later lead. The films were made between 1962 and 1980 and they all have rural themes that focus on the materiality of popular culture, especially traditional crafts and technologies. The themes are important here as they lead to the use of a camera as a means of replacing lengthy ethnographic descriptions. They influence the way of filming. More than anything else, these films deal with traditional agricultural activities (the linen cycle and tools), "handicraft" or material culture (basket making, pottery), and finally, the theme of ritual (folk religious festivities). In the case of these films, which we could call "museum films", the close connection between the various tools of interpretation (drawing, photograph, film and text) means that they depend on a context that is given by a set of materials, including museum collections. Another trait these films share is that they were not made "to be viewed" but rather to be kept in an archive. That is to say, they were conceived above all as a way to record and not so much as a form with its own expression. Film here becomes essential in a museum discourse that wanted objects to be given back their original living settings. A question of aesthetics is also at play here, that of giving depth back to the object, which can only be given within its own context of production and use. The controlled and systematic manner of filming and the use of "real time" in editing allowed an image to be recorded, preserved and repeated so that it might be examined in detail. These films are "passive and record what is happening without raising questions" (Leal *et al.*, *orgs.*, 1993:56-58). They are likewise films that are marked by urgency, shared throughout Europe, to film what was disappearing.

The second large body of cinematographic work is the work carried out by documentary filmmakers who embarked on the popular domain. (I will now show you excerpts from António Campos' films.) Popular culture is synonymous with rurality in professional documentary, apart from some films made during the April 25th Revolution and its aftermath and which dealt with urban populations. On the other hand, the films we are looking at now, again except for the revolutionary wave of films, are not about the contemporary world but are instead "witnesses of the past", "a past that has to be reconstructed through interpretation, that must be recorded before it disappears, that must be preserved, that has perhaps to be 'purified'" (Leal, 200:41). To understand this group of films, we must take into account the 1974 Revolution. Films were already being made on the margins of the political regime. Fiction film directors, caught up in the events, returned to what was really happening in Portugal. They wanted to record not so much what was coming to an end and was important to save, but the historic moment. The result was that a large quantity of films appeared during these years with a new language and a new representation of the common people. (We will see excerpts from *As Armas e o Povo*, a collective film, and *Deus Pátria e Autoridade*, directed by Rui Simões.) Many of these films show workers in the Alentejo taking over and occupying farms.

There are two regions in Portugal that appeal to filmmakers: Trás-os-Montes in the northeast and the Alentejo in the south. The former seems "like a chest filled with traditions, roots, identity references, which had been lost in those troubled times. In the end, we needed to reconstruct our identity a little. We went to the most hidden and remote province (Trás-os-Montes) in search of our past, whatever it was [...]. In the Alentejo, it was clear that the quest was for a future [...], films made about the occupation of lands, films made about the way the future was being prepared" (Pais de Brito in Leal et al., orgs., 1993:104). *Trás-os-Montes* (excerpt), directed by António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro, came out in 1976 in the turbulent years following the revolution, and can be used as a case study of this representation of rurality.

Ultimately, most of these films seem "[...] as a *certain kind of fiction*. That is to say, by means of a resolute effort of abstraction, *they pretend* that a certain reality remains unaltered and endeavour to film it in its intangible purity by suppressing anything that might disturb the portrait in the clarity of the early morning. These works, nearly always admirable, feed off a widespread *fiction of popular culture*" (Prado Coelho 1983: 70). There is a correspondence between this kind of Portuguese documentarism about the rural with folklorisation processes that modern anthropology studies. The "creator/manipulator" work of these filmmakers was taken to a certain extreme in *Trás-os-Montes*, where Reis shows a people as "guardian of traditions and Utopia, and opportunity of redemption for the city dweller" (Nunes, 2003:303).

At the time, films made by leftwing filmmakers were visible in contrast to the total invisibility of films made by ethnologists. Looking at these two groups of films, we can only ask ourselves why they failed to establish a standard tradition of Ethnographic Film in Portugal. As for an explanation for the non-existence of *documentarism* and the existence of *documentaries*, José Manuel Costa asks whether “the flight from a realistic and direct discourse about the real contemporary Portugal was something more than an impossibility on a practical level and might be rooted in a broader cultural tendency?” (2004:122).

The film *Trás-os-Montes* could in fact be used as an anchor to discuss this question of representation of the other and art’s cinematographic eye when faced with ethnographic films of a scientific kind that were being made at the same time. This film is put forward as being the most interesting of its time in cinematographic terms. “The most radical and aesthetically revolutionary films thus emerge as remaining completely distant from revolutionary “ongoing events” and activist “participation” (Ferreira, 2002: 304). This is not about comparing the two types of approaches – that of auteur cinema or ethnographic film – but rather of putting into perspective the type of different but ideologically marked representation they both created of popular culture.

In terms of representation of geographical space, both these two groups seem to be entrenched in the country, which presents a symbolic geography with different north/south representations. It is interesting to understand the discourse about landscape in the depiction of the peasant’s universe, the way the countryside is “a place of pleasant landscapes and noble virtues” and at the same time “a place where life is harder than what the beauty of the landscape allows us to suppose” (cf. Leal, 2001:141). However, there does seem to be a romanticised representation of rural life, a search for a harmonious relationship with nature, ancient forms of social organisation and sociabilities associated with a view that attaches more value to the collective at a cost to the individual. The search in this cinema for the exotic in country life, seen here as marginalised and isolated, is in fact made more intense with the cinematographic language used.

In March 1999, the Portuguese Cinemateca organised a film cycle called “*New Documentary in Portugal*”. The catalogue puts together a group of films made between 1994 and 1999 that show themselves not to be a *movement* but a *resolve*, a recent impulse, and says that we need more distance in time before we can examine them. It also mentions the total void from the late 1970s until now in which the cinema has not lived the international adventure of *direct film* (Costa, 1999). We may subsequently think that there has been a beginning and an end to a certain way of looking at Portugal along the general lines I’ve been trying to describe. Here, in this new documentary, everything starts again, as if this film genre had no past. This is about a group of directors for whom documentary film is not a minor genre but an option and they

are in tune with international trends, with new means of production linked to video. But the question I would like to end this talk with involves the topics we have reviewed and helps us put into perspective what we have examined for the 1960s and 1970s.

Another retrospective of Portuguese documentary films in 2001 brought together several themes: films about art, artists and exhibitions, introspective and intimate autobiographical films demonstrating greater experimentation in form, and addressing current social topics connected to urban life and Portugal's historical past, especially its relations with Africa (Baptista, 2001). We can consequently consider that in relation with what I said about the previous period, the image that this cinema projected of Portugal has been openly rejected. When this fictionalised "people" appears, as in the case of the film *Polifonias* of which we will see an excerpt, it is more as a means for presenting new characters – those who were once in search of that people.

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