

Traveling Images - Towards an Ethnographic Cinema of Montage

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Abstract

Up until now in ethnographic filmmaking the paradigm was, similar to that in writing: "you are there because I was there". During the last decades the language of ethnographic filmmaking has grown into an elaborated fetishism of the camera, for the sake of creating a natural feel of unity within a finite time and space. Supposedly the idea behind being to "capture" and therewith "save" endangered cultures, at least on film. Times changed. Whereas decades ago the ethnic groups we studied lived enclosed somewhere in the back of beyond, nowadays especially people from the non-industrialized countries are on the run. For political and economical reasons, and the possibility of spending all your life time at the spot where you were born, has become a privilege of the few. The "Traveling Cultures" of our times, migration, refugees, globalization, just to name a few key words, till now have had hardly an impact on ethnographic filmmaking. That is, we need to think about a different cinematic poetic that is apt to understand and convey the experience of living in a world of (dis-) locations and (a-) synchronisms. This is where "montage" comes in. Film is not only camera, it is also montage. Montage cuts and reorganizes the connections in time and space. Yet, in ethnographic filmmaking montage has always been played down. My aim is to build a bridge between current postcolonial issues in Cultural Anthropology on the one side and Classical Film Theory on the other side, and I will bring in the experience of filming my own documentary film "IXOK-WOMAN" (1990) as an example.

In my paper I will build a bridge between current postcolonial issues in Cultural Anthropology on the one side and Classical Film Theory on the other side, and I will bring in the experience of shooting my own documentary film "IXOK-WOMAN"; we will watch five minutes of this film at the end of the paper.

In the very early poetic days the goal for documentary filmmakers was: "You must show how a rose smells". But how does that dictum by Robert Flaherty translate into our times? The challenge in ethnography now is, how to adapt and rework anthropological practices to the "nonlocalized quality of cultural reproduction" (Appadurai 1996: 48), to use an expression of Arjun Appadurai. Focussing on the practice of ethnographic filmmaking, we come to the questions: - How do ethnoscaapes look and sound like on film?- How does "deterritorialization" taste? And in a close-up: What could be the expression on the face of somebody tasting it?

This traces the very situation we encountered while shooting our documentary film IXOK-WOMAN, which I made together with Dieter Matzka in 1990. A woman actress from Guatemala had captivated us with her stage performance, a one woman show about the live trajectory of a Guatemalan indigena peasant. So ravishing was her performance that we initially were led to think that she was an indigenous woman

herself. The actress' name was Carmen Samayoa. We followed her up. But in the first interview Carmen resolutely distanced herself from the stage person: no, she is not indigenous, doesn't know any Maya-Quiche dialect. She is a professional ballet dancer raised in the big city. I still remember her expression at that moment: part contentousness towards us, because we had naively mixed up the real and the stage person, part pride in the artistry and power of her acting that has misled us, part humbleness towards the real indigenous women who had contributed their life stories, and also a bit of demonstrative haughtiness, maybe because she has made her way on international stages and was not a simple indigenous woman? In that very expression we had found the subject of a film, a 90 minute portrait of Carmen.

Carmen's work, her artistic expression, her political and critical attitudes, was imbued by her existence as a woman and artist in a world full of unsurmountable borderlines, that Carmen easily and enthusiastically made to seem borderless. In the course of research we found that no single scene, no single shot would suffice to convey Carmen's experience to a European audience. A rich and complex character like Carmen called for a complex cinematic structure.

To show why Carmen and her partner Edgar lived in exile, we had to go back to Guatemala; to show the violence enacted by the state military against the Guatemalan indigenous people, we had to refer to Carmen's theater performance, because these acts are virtually not possible to be filmed in real life; to show the veracity of the stage play we had to shoot the military training in Guatemala; to show how Carmen bridged the different borderlines crossing her personal life - nationality, womanhood, race, stage - we had to shoot everyday scenes of her live on tour through Europe.

When we proposed our project to the German television, the commissioning editor was excited about the subject, but first he was doubtful how the theater scenes could fit into a documentary. And when we showed him our first rushes of theater scenes, he was so enthusiastic, that he could not imagine, how real live scenes from Guatemala could fit into the theater scenes. Finally television people were all so enthusiastic, that we got no television funding at all, and when the film finally was done, various television stations wanted to air the film without any reimbursement. To be fair, the commissioning editor had given me a chance. One day before our flight to Guatemala I should write down how I wanted to combine all these elements and layers in a single film. Time was too short then. Now, I take the chance and will sketch down elements of what I'd like to call an "ethnographic cinema of montage".

In a few words my point is: Up until now in ethnographic filmmaking the paradigm was, similar to that in writing: "you are there because I was there" (Appadurai 1996: 48). In film "participant observation" has always been translated into "observational cinema" (described by Crawford 1992: 77) But since the "writing culture" debate the classical modes of ethnographic practice have been critically revised, as "Twentieth-century ethnography (...) has become increasingly wary of localizing strategies in the construction and representation of "cultures". (Clifford 1997:19) James Clifford named some localizing strategies in writing: the tent, the village. I want to add: in ethnographic filmmaking the localizing strategy is the long, subjective shot. The primary marker of the long shot is not only the duration of the shot and use of the wide-angle lens; it includes also the avoidance of close-ups, the avoidance of multiple camera positions - with the overall aim to minimize editing.

David MacDougall, has laid out the epistemological background of the long shot, for which he coined the term "unprivileged camera style". He describes the background of shooting his film "To live with herds" 1972 in Uganda:

"What we were trying to give was a sense of being present in a Jie compound, a situation in which few of our viewers would ever find themselves. There were several reasons for this - to counteract prevalent representations of "exotic" people, to express the realities of fieldwork, to record informal aspects of culture, to allow individuals rather than types to emerge - and a number of things made it possible: our subjects' acknowledgement of our presence, our long and static camera takes, and the very low energy-level of much that we filmed." (MacDougall 1998: 200)

The aesthetic of the long shot is not only an epitome of ethnographic filmmaking, it also had a considerable influence on fiction film directors and consumers, who take long takes as a signal for "authenticity". In film theory that mode is referred to as "spatial realism". "Spatial realism" builds on the underlying cultural belief system that "the eye does not lie". (Kuehnast 189) Moreover, it considers the camera to be an unerring "mechanical eye" (Dziga Vertov - "kino glaz"). Which leads to the much quoted notion: as if "reality is inscribing itself" in the photographic image. Last not least "reality" is equated with "truth". So that, on the one hand the camera has only the right to record and enregister. On the other hand, since the 60ies, in many realist film styles, be it fictional or documentary, the camera has assumed "the role of god".

Therefore no single article about editing exists in visual anthropology! Editing is almost always referred to as a problem to be avoided. The question, that follows the era of authenticity in ethnographic filmmaking is: what does the notion of "travelling cultures" (James Clifford) entail in terms of images, camera movements, takes, cuts, scenes, sequences, stories and social actors? And I think, what has been dismissed from film language in ethnographic film - taking liberties with time and space - might be valuable and justified within new thematic contexts, especially in light of the postcolonial experience.

Film, and to be precise also ethnographic film, is not only camera, it is also montage. In order to make visible social and psychological effects of the globalising and the postcolonial world - migration, otherness, deterritorialization, hybridisation - we have to open up the language of ethnographic film to the medium of montage. While the camera is a vacuum cleaner voraciously sucking in time and space, montage is the unique medium that cuts and reorganizes connections in time and space; thus it is a medium, almost a definition of "analysis": understanding things invisible, by way of taking things apart and putting them together anew; rather than chronology, montage follows a question, an idea, an individual and social imagination. Montage is the primordial means in film language of saying "both... and", not "either...or": North and South, here and there, inside and outside, subjective and objective. Cinema is like "an "electronic quilting", to use an expression of Robert Stam, "(that) can weave together sounds and images in ways that break with linear, single-line narrative, opening up utopias (and dystopias) of infinite manipulability." Cinema is therefore "ideally equipped to express cultural and temporal hybridity." (Stam 2003: 37)

An "ethnographic cinema of montage" can equally not make exclusive truth claims. What it can offer is a broader scope of representational means, and more important, it can therewith expand the scope of thematic angles, issues, problems of ethnographic films: Where and when is deterritorialization happening? How can we visualize networked living spaces? How to portrait a hybrid identity? Where to put the camera in a virtual space? But first: What stories? What about the dramatic necessity of the unity of time and space in a deterritorialized world?

The grounds of montage have been laid out during the Russian silent movie era when the action was liberated of the definitions of time and space. It should suffice here for me to bridge the gap between cultural theories of globalization and

filmtheory. The shortest way is via the bridge-head terms "deterritorialization" on the side of cultural theory, and "creative geography" on the side of film theory.

Lev Kuleshov was the first theorist-filmmaker to experiment with disparate shots, and to take the decisive step from perceptive illusion to constructed spatial-and-mental dimensions. The most famous of these experiments consists of two pairs of shots: the face of an actor looking (the cut directed at the gaze is the primordial cut, per se) and an object, for example, a pot of soup, a woman, and a coffin. The audience inferred that the actor's expression correlated with the object. His expression seemed to reflect, in turn, hunger, love or pity. Kuleshov's intention was to mock the actor Mosjukine, a famous star of the theater in his time, by proving how inference and interpretation make up a great part of a story. But, in an off-handed manner, Kuleshov also invented spatial manipulation. By leaving out the establishing shots at the beginning of the sequence, he led the audience to carelessly suppose that the pot of soup and actor were present at the same space. His second experiment entitled "creative geography" is even of greater pertinence here. Kuleshov filmed passengers on Moscow streets, in reality miles apart from one another, but who in the film "look at each other" and at the White House in Washington! (Bordwell 2001: 259)

Eisenstein, to refer to the figurehead of montage in film history, loved the "sensation" of the cut. In stark contrast to the American-styled, smooth matching of series of shots. In his mind, the cut should be as tangible as possible. For him the cut, as the in-between-space separating two shots, was namely the site where one activated hidden meanings and challenged both the sensational and intellectual input of filmmaker and audience. (Reisz 1953: 33-38)

It should not be forgotten that the Russian artists of that time had a larger scope in mind than aesthetics alone. Though their investigations touched the very core of ontological filmtheoretical problems, it was not theory for theories sake. The experiments were driven by larger social ideas and questions: Analysing dictatorship, the causes of poverty, religion and its power of subjugation.

One of the first films in the history of cinema to depict simultaneity and analyze social conditions in parallel worlds is the experimental documentary piece "On the Subject of Nice" ("A propos de Nice", 1922), by Jean Vigo and Boris Kaufman – also one of my favorite films of all time. This seething send-up on the opulence of society overlooking obligation and making an almost sickening display of itself while doing so, relies heavily on montage that uses parallel editing. The goal is to make you an accomplice in a revolutionary society (Barnouw 1983: 77).

Montage can be a magic carpet that carries you away to distant places, the way we do it in dreams, and thus lull you into a dreamlike state. It is important to state though that this is a certain use of, and not inherent of this technique. "On the subject of Nice" proves this point very well. Montage is the primordial means in film language of saying "both... and", not "either...or": North and South, here and there, inside and outside, subjective and objective.

Just to give you an overview, let me preliminary list of various kinds of relations that adjacent images can form: generalization, comparison in time/space and of objects, simulation of physical experiences, simulation of movement, simulation of subjective perception, connection of two or more related storylines, flashbacks, repetition of a motif, contrast, dualism, succession/simultaneousness of actions, fusion/addition of two images, expression of complexity, multi-layeredness, co-existence, question and answer, extension and acceleration of time.

SCREENING: "IXOK - WOMAN", 5 minutes.

Instead of what occurs in the poetics of the long shot, where filmmakers try to give viewers the impression of “being there”, in the cinema of montage the space of the viewer, the movie theater or wherever the film might be projected, is transformed into the dominating location for the here and now. And this prods the viewers to ask “what is going on there?”.

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