

Symposium Paper: Framing themselves. The making of indigenous cinematographic tradition at Vídeo Nas Aldeias – Vincent Carelli

Review by Marleen Folkerts

Plainly recording a culture is impossible. The subject will always respond somehow to the presence of the filmmaker and to that of the camera. Or, in the words of Jean Rouch, anthropologist and filmmaker: “whether he wishes or not, the observer is integral to the general movement of things, and his most minute reactions are interpreted within the context of the particular system of thought that surrounds him” (Jean Rouch 97).

This kind of distortion is just one of the issues ethnographic filmmakers may come across when they are filming. Other issues are the often unequal relation between the filmmaker and the person being filmed, because the filmmaker is the one in charge; the legitimacy of a film; the ownership of images; and the representation of a culture and its members. One may have to deal with questions like: whether or not the filmmaker should be involved for the long term in the community in which he or she films; and who benefits from a film and how it can be avoided that the subjects feel exploited, especially in a time when the idea that culture is something that can be bought or sold is becoming increasingly important. At the symposium Participatory – What Does It Mean? Participatory Cinema – Participatory Video Under Consideration (GIEFF 2012), the participants tried to find out whether participatory cinema or participatory video can address these issues adequately.

Throughout his career, Jean Rouch collaborated in different ways with the subjects of his films. According to Rouch, by showing the film to the subjects, the filmmaker can give something back to, instead of just taking from them, namely the stimulation of their image and the chance for them to view themselves from a distance (Jean Rouch 221). For Rouch, beside extensive collaboration, a filmmaker can return something by training the people whom he/she works with to become a filmmaker. This would also address the distortion of a filmmaker as a cultural outsider.

Vídeo Nas Aldeias

Training (indigenous) filmmakers is exactly what filmmaker and activist Vincent Carelli has been doing since he started the project Vídeo Nas Aldeias in Brazil in 1987. The project turned out to be a leading initiative in the field of indigenous filmmaking allowing indigenous people to (re)create their own image. Vincent Carelli was present at the symposium and talked about the objectives of the project, namely to strengthen the communities’ identity and to defend their territorial and cultural heritage.

Vídeo Nas Aldeias forms an important network for the exchange of audiovisual material. Films are not only being screened in the villages where they have been shot, but also in other indigenous villages in Brazil. A film screened in the protagonists’ village allows the documentation of aspects of its culture and offers the opportunity for making cultural heritage accessible to future generations, furthermore, it invites a reflection upon one’s own culture and stimulates a self-awareness through image. Exchanging films between different indigenous communities stimulates cultural exchange; they become aware of each other’s cultural heritage and practices. The screening of the films to a broader (inter)national

audience serves the political goals of the project, such as increasing the awareness about the discrimination against indigenous people, the land reclaims, and the representation of indigenous people in the Brazilian media among the Brazilian and the international viewing public.

Bicicletas de Nhanderú

At the symposium, *Bicicletas de Nhanderú*, a film of the project Vídeo Nas Aldeias by Patricia Ferreira and Ariel Duarte Ortega, was being screened. The film is shot in a village of the Guarani-Mbya where we follow the building of a prayer house and we get to know a few villagers, in special two young boys and an older woman, who reflect upon the process of filmmaking.

According to Jean Rouch people respond to the presence of the camera by revealing themselves and in that revelation meaning is created (Jean Rouch 16). Throughout the film *Bicicletas de Nhanderú*, the protagonists are very conscious of the camera, they are looking at it and asking the filmmakers various questions about what the filmmakers are filming, if they are being filmed, and if the film will bring them or the filmmakers money.

Especially the two boys are addressing the camera openly and directly, they are playing with the presence of the camera and even telling the filmmaker what to film: “He doesn’t want to appear in our film. But he is going to anyway. He’ll appear. Film from here. He is over there. He’s looking!” (*Bicicletas de Nhanderú*). The boys are trying to find out what being filmed will mean for them and how they will be able to use it for their own means.

Thus, protagonists are able to negotiate over the value of and the realities represented in the film. Therefore, the filmmaker and the camera are not merely observing anymore, but are stimulating a mutual awareness (Jean Rouch 44) and are co-creating realities and meanings.

Since both filmmakers are member of the Guarani-Mbya, they were able to show the world of the Guarani-Mbya from within and to take the representation of themselves in their own hands. The film invites us to understand their culture and their current problematic from their perspective. There is no intervention of a cultural outsider or a strange language, which allows a rare intimacy. The closeness is apparent in a camera that walks, observes, follows, and participates and it enables the filmmakers to capture subtle, almost intangible aspects of this community’s culture. Throughout the film we see filmmakers becoming participating observers of their community’s culture, we witness the unfolding of a honest dialogue between the filmmakers and the persons being filmed, and the negotiation over and the construction of a shared interpretation of reality by the filmmaker and the film’s subjects.

Although the film *Bicicletas de Nhanderú* does not involve an anthropologist and the films of the project Vídeo Nas Aldeias serve far more political aims than an ethnographic film would probably do, the films touch upon some of the issues of visual anthropology. Issues such as ownership of the film, long-term commitment to the film’s subjects, and the sharing of the benefits of a film.

Besides observing, documenting and protecting cultural tradition, the films of Vídeo Nas Aldeias are creating an indigenous cinematographic tradition. Therefore, hopefully the

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screenings continues to be not limited to ethnographic festivals but keeps to be at all kinds of festivals worldwide, to reach the largest audience possible and to be acknowledged for what they represent; an independent and original indigenous film tradition.

Ciné-Ethnography, Jean Rouch; ed. and transl. Steven Feld, Minneapolis 2003

Quotation from *Bicicletas de Nhanderú*, a film by Patricia Ferreira and Ariel Duarte

The website of the project Vídeo Nas Aldeias, here you can find further information about and order films of the project: <http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br>