

Symposium Paper: Filming the Real in Myanmar (Yangon Film School) – Lindsey Merrison and Hnin Ei Hlaing

Review by Melanie Langpap

Lindsay Merrison and Hnin Ei Hlaing (aka “Snow”) represent the “Yangon Filmschool” (YFS) founded by filmmaker Lindsay Merrison in 2005. According to YFS’s philosophy, being a Myanmar national is a prerequisite for YFS students and staff. By 2015 the film school should be conducted through local filmmakers and managers only. The fee to attend one of YFS’ film workshops amount to MML 60,000 (about 57 EUR as of 5 June 2012)¹. More about goals, purpose and procedures can be read on the website.² But what is not written there are the challenging circumstances in which YFS has been established and is still running. Without having any own experience of Myanmar one can only guess the meaning “military democracy” (2006)³, heading towards “civilian democracy” (2012)⁴. Press freedom, the expression of art and mind have been limited not to say censored and still are. Hence not all films could be produced or find their way out of the country even in a legal way. “Snow” herself joined YFS in 2006 as a student. She later gave workshops for others and became a permanent staff member. One of her films “Burmese Butterfly” was shown earlier during the Göttingen Filmfestival. Both Merrison and “Snow” now attend the Festival and following discussions. It emphasizes the participatory approach for which YFS stands and this symposium gave the platform for. The following report considers the work and relevance of YFS in the wider context of the many contributions given during the three daylong symposium “Participatory Video – What does it mean?”.

1. Participating anthropologists who are working with the film medium can be quoted with “We are empowering them...”, “My participants...”, “I am a censor”, “I let them do...”, etc. It seems to be worth wondering whether that kind of wording affects their film-work in theory and practice.
 - My conclusion: The active, somehow leading role of those who initiate, implement and conclude the film process need to be further discussed, as transparently as possible. We otherwise run the danger of undermining the overall title of “participatory video”.
2. The issue of copyright was not mentioned once during the three daylong symposium. Nevertheless it is obviously relevant in peoples mind: K. Thompson and S. Surata do not show the video footage they produced in Indonesia, saying: “It [the footage] stays with them.” However, stills of the film *are* shown. Another example is filmmaker/ anthropologist K. Hanson who shared some of the original footage

¹ “Art of Documentary Filmmaking Beginners” – Workshop.

² <http://yangonfilmschool.org/>.

³ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HJ04Ae02.html (11.06.2012).

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12990563> (11.06.2012).

(“Shooting Freetown...”) with a protagonist without any charge. Both examples, Thompson/ Surata and Hanson, raise the question of ownership and copyrights but lack the necessary transparency and discussion in the symposium itself.

- My conclusion: The issue of copyright shows a limit of how participatory video can be. Therefore any definition of “participatory video” is impossible without a transparent discussion on that.
3. The term “Media has the power...” was heard more than once during the symposium. But isn’t the power with-/in the human being who uses or passes on (film-) equipment as well as skills?⁵ That also includes aesthetical and quality aspects which have obviously been strongly considered in the films of Merrison and “Snow” but less in the vast majority of films shown during the symposium. Further issues worth mentioning here refer to the funding of any presented film. Don’t the “sponsor/s” have a word if not the final decision regarding any degree of participation too? And to what extent are the government (e.g. in post-conflict countries) or film distributors involved in this discussion?
- My conclusion: It seems that any participatory approach requires a clear distinction between the filmmaking *process* and the final film as a *product* that is screened or sold even. The purpose of any film-/production is of high relevance: Is it produced for the private or the public sector, for scientific reasons or as a method in social work? In any case, I personally wish that every film is made at its best available quality only (including technical equipment, aesthetic and visual habits of filmmakers, protagonists and assumed audience). This could ensure a valuable and sustainable process as well as outcome whatever the overall purpose may be.
4. One can assume a fragile political and/ or culturally “overloaded” setting where the work of YFS as well as other anthropologists/ filmmakers of this symposium take place. I might connect this with my ongoing film-/work in Nepal where there is a caste- and hierarchy system, gender discrimination or as many languages as ethnical groups.
- My conclusion: Due to many deep-seated, complex reasons there are in fact many people (and “their issues”) who are not involved, hence do not participate. This could be mentioned more clearly. Protagonists are participants, they participate in the filmmaking process but hardly appear in any of the screenings whereas the filmmaker usually does. My conclusion: With regards to the topic any film deals with, the screening usually is exclusive (of protagonists or film crew members who are not invited, audience who cannot afford entry or travel costs, etc.) and therefore shows another limit of “participatory video”. Finally all who participated in this symposium could be reminded of the unannounced film- and photo shooting during the overall event. Some shot a video, others took stills - for

⁵ Who teaches this knowledge and based on what kind of film-/background? For what and more striking for whom are the films? Who is interested in the process only, who is doing what with the final output file?

whom or where this footage will possibly be screened was not been mentioned nor have those who became the protagonists of this footage been asked for permission.

- My question: Does the experienced practice of “just doing it” undermine the headline of this symposium?

Conclusion

As Dr. B. Engelbrecht mentions in her final remarks, it can be questioned whether it makes any sense to talk about “Shared Anthropology”. One could go even further and ask whether “Shared Anthropology” is possible at all, meaning: Who is in fact interested in what outcome? A clear distinction between the (film-) *process* and the (film-) *product* seems to be necessary to define meaning and limits of “participatory video”. Therefore a transparent, ambiguous description on the outset could be useful, e. g.: Does it focus on the filmmaking process or the final film as an output? How does the funding mechanism influence the degree of participation? Who has the copyrights? How is Freedom of Press (or Creative Arts) practiced in the film-/making? The symposium definitely gave many good, even conceptualized examples for a participatory video process (involvement, inclusion) but hardly any for an overall participatory video product (shared ownership). At some point participation might be replaced with “ownership” to define those who want the film and take the overall responsibility. Beyond that I wish that any film, whether it is to be screened to an inter-/national audience, within or beyond the scientific community, would follow existing film requirements more consequently in terms of quality and viewer’s habits. YFS in this context can be considered as a best-practice-example. Merrison and “Snow” representing YFS present quality and sustainability with a participatory approach. That will help to ensure a skilled, creative media culture in Myanmar. It also indicates a limit of participation that necessarily occurs for filmmakers/ anthropologists who want to make a living out of their work.

As it was also said by Dr. B. Engelbrecht, the symposium left a number of questions open but definitely gave an impression of the complexities on “participatory video”. I really appreciate the given opportunity to have participated in this symposium.