



visual ethnography

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Visual Experimentation. Art, Aesthetics and Ethnography in (Un)guided Tour, a video by Irina Botea, Marco De Luca and Stefan Voicu

Watch the video here: http://youtu.be/PEnXKfoyt_A

Abstract

The following paper deals with the production of a short ethnographic video on the Royal Museum of Central Africa from Terruren, Belgium. The scope is to deploy the organization of the ethnographic team that participated in the articulation of the project, unravel the context in which the project emerged and unfolded, as well as engaging with the elaboration of the audio-visual approach taken within the ethnographic research. Focusing particularly on the latter aspect, this paper will portray the relation between art and ethnography as being characterized by experimentations with aesthetics. Taking a look back at certain artistic movements that explored the limits and possibilities of film aesthetics, the entries will pinpoint the relevance of lettrist cinema, institutional critique and structural film to the construction of an ethnographic video on the museum practices of the RMCA.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Art, Ethnography, Museum

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De-centering, De-marginalizing and (Re-)Tracing.

Visual anthropology has had a marginal position within the discipline. Pink (2006) has claimed that one of the reasons has been that of not raising up to the scientific profile anthropology was trying to acquire. Although some big names, like Boas, Malinowski, Mead etc., used visual material in their works, photos, films and others alike were not treated as ethnography per se, but rather as auxiliary material that recorded certain aspects of the fieldwork. Among the various technologies present at hand for conducting visual research, film was the most privileged one (Banks & Morphy 1997). Thus, within the institutional forms that this sub-discipline took there was an increased concern in how to elaborate a scientific method based on film-making (Taureg 1981, Koloss 1981, Husmann 1981, Maloney et.al. 1981). However, others, drawing from a less rigorous definition of science and engaging with innovation in technological equipment and epistemological “breakthroughs” have been preoccupied with the elaboration of an ethnographic film that could stand on its own. This saw the emergence of cinema verite, observational cinema and participatory cinema (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, 24-25).

The observational movement in postwar American documentary cinema is commonly linked to changes in filmmaking technology. Developments in recording equipment, most notably the switch from heavy tripod-based cameras to relatively lightweight handheld ones and the ability of filmmakers to record sound synchronous with the image, have longed been invoked as the driving force behind changes in the subject matter, techniques, and aesthetics of the 1960s documentary cinema. For filmmakers like Drew of Leacock, the technological breakthrough was also an epistemological breakthrough, making possible work that they believed lay closer to reality than the highly mediated films of their Griersonian predecessors.

Although more acknowledged by cinematographic institutions, rather than anthropological ones, and highly influenced by the theory and practice of cinema, as Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) show in the case of observational cinema and its relation to the Italian neorealist cinema outlined by Bazin, these movements, based on the dichotomy fiction - reality, were still keeping a distance from more artistic endeavors.

It was the advent of postmodern theory in anthropology that managed to deconstruct the tokens of scientism by showing how fiction and reality are not different in substance but in form, since for the postmoderns there is either no substance, a non-essentialist substance, or no way to know it. What followed was an attention given to aesthetics (Weiner 1996), art (Marcus & Myers 1995), ethnography (Marcus & Fischer 1986, Clifford & Marcus 1986) and the relation between these three (Lavie et.al. 1993, Foster 1995, Schneider & Wright 2006, Schneider & Wright 2010, Marcus 2010). This short video is an exploration of the possibilities of de-centering film within visual anthropology, de-marginalize visual anthropology within social and cultural anthropology and (re-)trace strong ties between art and anthropology. Expanding on Russell's argument (2003), the starting point is that of the (re-)tracing of the relations that experimental cinema and critical art had and, now more overt than ever, has with ethnography. Russell (2003, xii) mentioned that:

The effect of bringing experimental and ethnographic film together is one of mutual illumination. On the experimental side, ethnography provides a critical framework for shifting the focus from formal concerns to a recognition of avant-garde filmmakers' cultural investment and positioning. On the ethnographic side, the textual innovations that have been developed by experimental filmmakers indicate the ways that "the critique of authenticity" has been played out in the cinema.

The expansion of her argument consists in unfolding the aesthetic experiments undertaken by lettrist cinema, institutional critique and structural film, suggesting that it is this sort of experimental practices that make possible the tie between art and ethnography. Furthermore the visual technologies as well as the themes and topics questioned and explored by these movements will allow the articulation of a de-centralization of film and a de-marginalization of visual anthropology.

This project's approach is by no means a novelty. Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) while exploring observational cinema had, more or less, the same intentions. Yet, to a certain extent some differences pop up. First, while Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) pursue their project with a paradigmatic (Kuhn 1970) approach, meaning that they attempt to set a framework for ethnographic filmmaking based on the interwoven between the aesthetics of observational cinema and experiential epistemology, this short video's approach is a heuristic one (Feyerabend 1975), where there is no framework but an assemblages of aesthetics and epistemologies, juxtaposed within and in relation to the site(s) of its articulation. Second, one can still see a precaution at not blurring, erasing or suspending the division between art and anthropology in their work. On the opposite, this project aims at recomposing research into everyday practices by means of strengthening art and/as anthropology, to the point of not being able to and not considering the division between art and anthropology. Both of these differences strongly related to a third one, which is based on the distinction Benjamin (1936) makes between aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics. Throughout the project one can observe the way in which our intent was that of politicizing aesthetics by

weaving the separations made, and reproduced by Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009), between author and spectator, academia and popular media, amateur consumer technology and professional equipment etc.

From the University to the Museum: Back and Forth...and Beyond

This ethnographic project was initiated by Irina Botea, Marco De Luca and Stefan Voicu as an assignment for the *Visual Anthropology: History, Theory and Experimentation* course, taught by professor Patrick Devlieger during the second semester of the 2012-2013 academic year. The course is on the curriculum of the Master of Science in Social and Cultural Anthropology at KU Leuven which all three of us follow. Irina Botea has been doing research on visual representation in Japanese animation film. Marco De Luca conducted his research in South Italy, focusing on the recent wave of North African migration and its connection with the Italian state and capitalism. Stefan Voicu has studied the Romanian regime of artistic practices and the relation between artworks, work in art and value. Although rather heterogeneous, our interest converge in terms of dealing with representation and power dynamics in defining culture and cultures. In the frame of the course we were given the possibility to work on the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) from Tervuren, Belgium. The museum organized a competition called *Museum Straight of the Reel*, that allowed students from various disciplines, as well as museum audience, to pursue a cinematographic project about the past, present and future activities of the RMCA. Organized by Min De Meersman, the competition had the goal of marking the closure of the museum for the three year renovation program. Thus, our team seized the opportunity to elaborate a visual ethnographic approach of the museum while dealing with the topics we were familiar with and engaged in our own individual researches.

Whereas the university and the museum were launching pads for our project, opening possibilities in terms of technical equipment and conceptual research, they also imposed certain limits. On one hand, the university granted us access to a production studio, video camera with accessories and theoretical resources, while the museum allowed us to record activities, interview persons and consult archives. On the other hand, the university's equipment was insufficient for the number of students that needed it, the theoretical input constrained us to resume our creative process within the anthropological tradition and a number of styles encountered in visual ethnography outlined by professor Devlieger had to be explored. The museum as well, restricted our access to certain materials and spaces and imposed us a 5 minutes time limit to our project. Both of the institutions set deadlines that we had to respect and which intervened with our student workload for other courses we were mandated to follow. A thing that made the process ever more sinuous considering the geographical distance between the two institutions and the amount of time required to move from one to the other.

In order to manage the possibilities and the limits that arose we divided our labor in three areas: production, research and audio-visual direction. Irina Botea was responsible with

the production tasks. This involved the facilitation of administrative issues: making appointments, ease our way through the bureaucratic mechanisms and provide for the technical equipments and materials we needed to elaborate the project. Marco De Luca handled the research aspect. He gathered information about the museum's practices and dwelt into theoretical literature on museology. Stefan Voicu worked on the audio-visual approach which involved research on the epistemology and aesthetics of visual ethnography, as well as the direction of the recording and editing of the final video. Our tasks often overlapped and more than once we switched roles. Yet, we kept this division in order to have an organizational frame to which we can rely on in case something went wrong. Fortunately we did not encountered difficulties and we managed to collaborate on various planes, allowing us to explore the creative impulses of each of us.

After a period of research in which we visited the museum several times, interacted with the institutions that were framing our project and reviewed the literature available, we started articulating, in the weekly meetings we had, our video's statement. Rather than outlining a research question we decided to remain consistent in our eclecticism and worked by way of juxtaposing, displacing, disjuncting and detouring the materials at hand, whether they were from the past, the present or the future of the museum. This way we tried to achieve, first, a reconversion of the museum from its structured, hierarchical organization into a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari 1983) and as such re-enable it in the various contemporary discourses. Second, an intervention so that we could generate that fictional rhizomatic space of questioning and debating, rather than setting an observational distance and academically seclude ourselves from collective discussions.

Throughout the whole project we tried to self-justify our actions on every dimension by means of what Benjamin (1936) referred to as politicizing aesthetics. Meaning that “work itself is given a voice” and “literary licence”, and video/researcher licence in our case, becomes “common property”. That implied a blurring between polarities like fact-fiction, audience-auteur, performer-observer, professional equipment-consumer equipment etc. We integrated in the short time span of the video materials that are part of the museum collection and archives, as well as random impressions left by visitors, no matter how far-fetched they were. Since there was a limit to the number of 'voices' we could squeeze in the video, we tried to also bring in the audience through Internet video-hosting websites that allow unlimited and unrestricted commentaries, unlike the museum and the university were it had to be screened (the video got uploaded on YouTube¹). We performed both the anthropologists and the artists, yet at the same time the audience. We avoided academic jargon and professional video cameras in order to allow the audience to reverse its position at any given moment. For the same latter reason, we limited our recording to the areas where any visitor of the museum can have access.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEnXKfoyT_A

Lettrist Cinema, Institutional Critique and Structural Film

Now that I have briefly sketched the context in which the project emerged and unraveled, I will continue by describing my audio-visual tasks and how I managed to explore the limits often encountered. This part also serves to formulate the project as an attempt to de-center film, de-marginalize visual anthropology and re-trace the links between art and ethnography in the form of aesthetic experimentations. And how these three scopes were achieved by way of approaching the project in a heuristic manner, blurring the artist-anthropologist divide and politicizing aesthetics. Even though these goals might seem too ambitious, they are most of the time interwoven lines of thoughts and practices. For this reason I will construct the argument in the same manner in which the project in its various ramification was conceived, i.e. as a flow within and with rhizomatic forms.

During the course, professor Devlieger outlined four visual ethnography styles and encouraged the students to combine what he deemed as essential features of these. The didactic style, better known as the expository or Griersonian style, seeks to inform and instruct (Barbash & Taylor 1997). Thus, taking out the paternalism of instruction, our video project had to be based on an informative argumentation of a cultural skill. The structural style and its trait of reformulating the gaze in such a manner that it transforms space and time “into an autonomous image sphere that may be grounded in a pre-existing reality, but it is also independent of it” (Russell 2003, 190). The auto-ethnographic style that works out the entanglement of the “self” with the “other”, where the former becomes a fragment of the latter (Russell, 2003). The sensorial style as employed for example in the haptic cinema (Marks 2000) which evokes through vision and audio a tactile, olfactory and/or gustatory sense.

I have re-traced the link between art and ethnography taking into consideration, first, the site of our project, that is the museum, and second the styles outlined during the course. I was interested as well in how these links might broaden the spectrum of themes and media that might limit our project. And, also on how they might be consistent with the idea of politicizing aesthetics. The ground of these links is aesthetic experimentation by which I mean an interest in producing and reproducing formal characteristics of affects that go as far as being anti-aesthetic, or purely aesthetic. Thus, I inquired into three artistic movements, lettrism, institutional critique and structural film, that interlaced became a source from which I drew the audio-visual part of this project.

Lettrist Cinema

The Lettrist movement emerged in the 1940s Paris around the figure of Isidore Isou. Their goals were to break with earlier avant-garde artistic practices and generate a body of literary, visual, audio and performative works that overcomes their precedents'. Although Home (1991) has argued that Isou did not articulate a critique of “social dominance”, other members of the group and their subsequent projects after the demise of Lettrism, as in the work of Guy Debord, proves the contrary. There has always been the germ and incipient

articulation of such a critique whether addressed to capitalism in general, or the bourgeois structure of art. Much as anthropology since the 1980s, the lettrists were concerned with the institutional power involved in representations of culture and inquired the limits of their media and agency. But, unlike anthropologists, the lettrists managed to outline a multi-media approach to culture. Their cinematic experiments cannot be considered only as visual manifestations because they incorporate the literary, the audio and the performative maintaining them relatively autonomous in each other's dependence (Uroskie 2011).

Among the lettrist cinematic experiments, three films stand out and, more or less coincidentally, are the most well known. Isidore Isou's 1951 *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (*Treatise on Slobber and Eternity*) portrays a young man walking through the streets of Paris. The film roll, on which the film was shot, was deliberately scratch and it looks as amateur found footage, badly preserved. Overlapped is the voice of a man, Isou himself, that cannot be identified as the same young man in the footage and which, instead of narrating what one sees, is preoccupied with enunciated a discourses in a public context, in a essayist manner, on film, politics, love and other themes that might have resonated with the audience at that time. At moments, the images are at times substituted with text that does not necessarily relate in content to the image or the sound. The juxtaposition of themes and the disjunction of the various media that compose the film can be said to have achieved the same goals we have pursued in our video project, to create a fictional open space where multiple voices are included and engaged in debates on what representation is. The two other films follow the same lines, but unlike Isou's the visual part is gradually reduced. In Gil J. Wolman's 1952 *L'Anticoncept* (*The Anticoncept*) throughout the whole duration of the film there is only a white filled circle on a black background that at certain intervals flickers, while in Guy Debord's 1952 *Hurlements in faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*) there is only an alternation between white and black screen.

Within lettrist cinema the main traits of the styles the project had to integrate are dealt with. It informs the viewer on the skills of representation and their relation to political, economic, religious etc institutions while engaging the audience in appropriating the film and reversing the unidirectional gaze into a collective performance (most of the screenings of their film ended up in riots and police interventions). The “self” of the film auteur is strongly imprinted in the cinematic endeavor, the voice-overs being framed as the voice of the filmmaker, but at the same time it is difficult to disentangle it from the “other”, combing fiction and fact so that any sort of ego driven intentions are eluded. Techniques as scratching the film roll and the disjunction of sound, video, and text bring in an evocation of touch as in the haptic cinema. Also this artistic movement is consistent with the idea of politicizing aesthetics because of the tendency to use non-professional equipment and to reduce the craft to its basics in order to provide an anti-aesthetics out of which any voice can elaborate and self-fashion its ideas.

Institutional Critique

The umbrella term institutional critique has been employed to categorize artworks and artists, since the 1960s until present day, that articulate a critique of the institutions that produce and conserve cultural representations, such as museums, art galleries, art schools etc. The lettrist movement can be categorized, although its diachronicity, as a third wave instance of institutional critique, characterized by what Rauning (2009) calls traversal critique. That is a critique that deals with representation within the field of cultural production and also the field of politics, economics, religion, so on and so forth. What this artistic movement brought to the fore was the attention given to artistic institutions by deconstructing the naiveté that surrounded them, keeping the same disjunction of media seen in the lettrist cinema, but taken outside the confinements of film with the help of installations and interventionist performances. Two works of art situated under this term have been particularly influential for the video project my team has undergone. One done by Andrea Fraser and the other by Fred Wilson.

Little Frank and his Carp is a 2001 performance done by Andrea Fraser at the Guggenheim Bilbao. Videotaped with concealed cameras, the footage shows Fraser as a museum visitor, listening to the audio guide provided at the entrance. Reversing her role of artist and art docent, she interacts with the museum based on the narrative of the guide. Describing the architecture of the space, the narrator transforms Fraser into a visitor amazed of what surrounds her. Hearing the voice detailing the “sensuous curves” of the buildings pillars, Fraser starts touching them and acting as if she is aroused, rubbing against the walls and lifting her skirt while feeling up her body. The hidden cameras portray the perplexed visitors and Fraser, becoming aware of their gaze, feels ashamed and continues her visit pretending nothing happened.

In her piece, besides the disjunction kept between video and performance there is also the conversion of the museum into a medium found in relation to other materials employed in her artwork. Transformed into a medium, the narrow theme of the institutional critique pertains to a transversal appropriation. And even though not a film/video, the performance seems to incorporate the traits of the four styles that I have mentioned above. Information, the gaze, the self as other and the senses are all connected and explored in her art. In a similar manner, Fred Wilson, an Afro-American artist, makes installations in which he displaces heterogeneous objects found in the museum in order to criticize and further on re-articulate the meaning with which they, the objects and the museum, have been inscribed. In his 2011 *Liberty/Liberté* he explores the Afro-American heritage and bridges it with global historical processes. He uses and juxtaposes, among others, George Washington and Napoleon sculptures with slave shackles and tags and a portrait of Toussaint Louverture. The intent of the artwork by bringing these different objects together and arrange them in a particular manner is to, in Wilson's own words: “talk about the complexities of our history, the problems and the greatness, in one place”².

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRi0nqYzVlY>

Structural Film

Like institutional critique, structural film is a term with which certain film critics and film-makers have characterized some tendencies in avant-garde cinema during the 1960s-1970s. This movement starts from where the lettrists have left off their projects. Most of the films done in this tradition have radicalized even further the experiments of Wolman and Debord. In its 'pure' form, structural film ended up in an extreme formalist preoccupation, in this way bypassing contextual issues involved in the questions representations and cultural representation pose. But as Russell (2003) noted, 'impure' structural films have managed to bring together a broader range of techniques which enabled them to incorporate cultural concerns. In the works of Chantal Ackerman and James Benning, various themes are juxtaposed, materials displaced and detoured. Yet, unlike the lettrists, the media disjunction in their films is only potential. In the sense that confined to the film medium, they have worked a technique that allows one to disentangle the montage and place the footage in an installation or performance context, as Chantal Ackerman has recently done.

Using a fixed camera frame and editing the footage in such a manner that the viewer perceives it as an endless sequence of establishing shots, their films are rendered as potential re-composable networks of autonomous scenes. I am thinking especially of Ackerman's 1977 *News from Home* and Benning's 1977 *One Way Boogie Woogie*. Both of them are showing fixed, long, scenes depicting persons in a particular environment, edited in such a manner that it can be de-montaged and re-assembled in a different manner or in a different context. These films, although construing their meaning based on the relationality between the various scenes, can be re-appropriated in fragments, thus breaking with the compact modality of making the lettrist films and enabling the possibility of being redeployed in performances and installations.

Interlaced, lettrist cinema, institutional critique and structural film provided for this video project the underpinnings of its articulation. First, I took from the lettrist cinema their procedure of juxtaposing themes relating to institutional power and bringing together in disjunction various media, while being consistent with the idea of politicizing aesthetics and dealing with the four styles we were mandated to explore. Second, institutional critique emphasized on the power involved in those institutions that produce and preserve cultural representation, integrating the topic in symmetry with issues revolved around politics, economics, religion etc. Also, this movement managed to transform these institutions in artistic media by employing performative and installation practices. Lastly, structural film broke the compact articulation of the lettrist film and as such enabled the final product of film-making to be appropriated as fragments in installations and performances. Engaging with these three artistic movements one can observe the de-centering of film. By means of text, sound, image, performance and installations different media are brought together and still kept relatively autonomous in relation to one another. The juxtaposition of a broad range of themes and the interest in representations set these endeavors on the same line with interests pursued within the dominant anthropological practices, thus de-marginalizing visual anthropology.

(Un)Guided Tour

Our short video project, entitled *(Un)Guided Tour*, is opened to different readings, re-appropriations and re-contextualizations. Although one can be guided by the three artistic movements the audio-visual part was built on, the project goes beyond what the three offered. Intentionally I have hindered the specifics of the various themes approached in juxtaposition by those movements, so that one does not equate their idiosyncrasies with ours. Normally, I should have written a section that goes into the description of the video, yet that would have already established a reading and one way or another might have become the only one. Thus instead of a description and an interpretative frame, the video is deployed together with a statement, as the artist do whenever they exhibit an artwork. Rewriting it here has the goal to encourage the reader of this paper to watch the video, articulate its own reading and appropriate the project in its own interests.

The museum has been and still is under critical siege since post-WWII. The museum, that cultural institution of the so-called "West", the offspring of the modernist ideal of representativity. The Royal Museum of Central Africa was king Leopold's attempt to elaborate a representative sample of the culture of the African people found under his colonial dominion. An attempt that aimed to transform this culture into a commodity.

The critics believe that the de-contextualization of the African artifacts made them inert. It made them objects easily appropriated into the powerful's interests. Contrarwise, we believe that these objects frolic in the museum and thus discharge meanings. New meanings. Meanings that fuse with Western meanings. Hybrid meanings. The critics believe that sampling excludes and thus under-represents people and activities. Representativity is imbued with the politics of absence. Yet, we believe that what is absent is not African related but the hybrid meanings active not in the museum, but as the museum.

We want to crack a visual hole into the museum's anti-critique shield. We want to retie the division made between representation and culture, Africa and the West, absence and presence, fiction and reality. We want to slice the museum epidermic tissue in order to see its hybrid and randomized skeleton. Our film will hence be a travelogue through and with an endless rhizomatic juxtapositions. Our intent is that of reassembling those disjointed fragments pulsating in the post-deconstruction vacuum. Our goal is to rebuild ontologically the museum as a hybrid entity and reissue its sense of belonging to the contemporary.

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