



### **Dissecting hybridity within Experimental Ethnography**

*Review of the The international Conference “Nuouvelles Visions: Anthropologie, Art and Film Experimental” organized by Caterina Pasqualino (CNRS, EHESS) and Arnd Schneider (University of Oslo) to the Museum Quai Branly, Paris, March 30-31, 2012.*

#### **Maica Gugolati**

M.A. in Anthropology at EHESS (Paris, France)

#### **Jasmine B. Liverpool**

Independent ethno-experimental filmmaker and Degree in Cinema at Paris VIII.

Visual Anthropology contemporarily is understood as the study of pictorial representations of culture. Inclusive in this definition is the actual means of production through photography, film and video that depicts the anthropologist's methodology in observation of their subject.

Within the genre that is Visual Anthropology - where traditional ethnographic film is habituated – exist a subgenre known as experimental ethnography; in which the techniques are utilized in the production of avant-garde art & film and then applied in the production of ethnographic cinema.

In it self Visual Anthropology has not yet come to have a prominent identity within the practice of general Anthropology.

The impression from this Symposium is that this subject has a new malleable character, not empirically definable. Each invited explained and showed his work and ideology often in contradiction with each other, because of its new and hybrid status, as an unborn subject.

Within the Symposium, there were five panellists that we felt were prominent and influential.

Caterina Pasqualino opened the Dialogue focusing on her thinking about the hallucinatory images and the aesthetical visions of sensations explained through the experimental cinema.

She centered her research in living time, beyond the conception of linear time in film

shoots and in postproduction.

The traditional vision in this experience is broken down and expressed in a subjective and cyclical time, alternating in states of consciousness and unconsciousness without an ontological difference. Her experimental film wants to reproduce the process of possession from Palo Monte voodoo religion in Cuba in its alternates' states of consciousness. She wants by camera to show that within the out of body experience, there is disembodiment and lucidity through different kinds of time, created by montage. Also inclusive is the supra-temporality of the experience.

Time laps and slow-motion or time-slope are used for showing the infratime of the discontinuous movements during the possession by death.

This kind of approach suddenly was supported from a Japanese artist Yoko Fokushima, showing her work "Making Circles, Metamorphosis (France, 2002, 3'20)". She analysed the estate of madness in exchanging pictorials and oneiric images in her video performance and using oleographic images.

Rane Willerslev from the University of Oslo focused his discussion in a rejection of the conception that the camera, like a human eye, judged an illusion from the observational cinema. He argued that the montage could show and develop the visual abstraction -the invisible world present in the visible one - based on the notion of Merleau-Ponty's *Invisible*. The montage could evoke the gap between the visual manifestations and the magical-religious side of reality maintaining the limit of the invisibility in it self.

Moreover, it can film the invisible breaking the mimic dogma of the humanized camera.

One of the ethnographic filmmaker's deficiency, is the recognition of the invisible dimension in human life.

The mimetic vision takes just the visible side of social life. So words were essentially formless and were the only tool to express the invisible – like emotions - not captured by camera.

This observational cinema tends to show all the subjects in the same plane of embodied spatial and temporal existence with no manipulation. The experimental anthropological movie can be a medium capable to communicate and to substitute the words maintaining tensions between the visible reality and the invisible one of social human experience.

The tradition wanted to use the camera like a succession, like a prolongation of the human eye in a mimetic way of looking regarding a physical extension. Then preserving the integrity of the ethnographical science with observational filmmaking.

The montage, on the contrary, organizes a unity in the diversity, juxtaposing shoots to the normal perception of visual experience. Furthermore giving a superhuman vision that pushes the borderlines of the observable worlds, and it gives the possibility of evoking the invisible without reducing its visibility.

*"Every single image there lies a capacity of seeing the invisible"*<sup>1</sup>.

This experimentation is between art -in it's widest scene- and also anthropology, trying to cross over the idea of a panopticon film dreamt by the firsts social scientists.

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<sup>1</sup> Rane Willerslev (University of Oslo) during the Symposium.

Kathryn Ramsey is an Anthropologist/Filmmaker & a professor of media arts at Emerson College located in the U.S., is an avid supporter of Robert Asher.

Asher's holistic technique was painting directly on the celluloid of the film, representational images that correlated with the footage. The effectiveness of this technique -the superimposed texture of these images - aids the viewer in furthering the comprehension of the subject. Exemplifying that the animation contextualizes the film.

*Robert Asher* "would take a myth- that myths are common to all cultures and that everyone dreams- and there are certain continuity between all the kinds of dreams". They "exist ubiquitously through out culture and share space with a dream world and that dreams are central to all humans and all cultures."<sup>2</sup>

Brad Butler's film "*The Exception and The Rule*" (UK, 2009, 37'), was filmed in Karachi, Pakistan and Mumbai, India. He avoided traditional documentary modes using long shots & time lapses; in which the film frames everyday activities incorporating performances to the camera, public interventions and observations. Butler's use of spasmodic images, superimpositions, repetitive audio depicting a urban mantra and his voice acting as narrative were the components of the film. The viewers are never lead to any particular conclusion; they ascertain freely their own observations. These components enhance the subject in such a way that the spectator's perspective is expanded to explore other possibilities.

*"To understand Pakistan you must first understand that you cannot rationalize the non rational".*

Along with filmmakers there were speakers at the symposium who expressed their perspective on the genre. Jean Paul Colleyn (EHESS, Ceaf) who talked about the sense of poetry in the documentary as new form between an artistic and ethnological film. Also again Kathryn Ramsey, with her film *Yanqui Walker and the Optical Revolution* (U.S.A., 2009, 33') and Arnd Schneider (University of Oslo) who talked about his contribution about photo-film: other speakers are visible on the Symposium's program<sup>4</sup>.

Visual anthropology's need to snatch the Husserl's Maya's veil expressed from the camera in the mimetical cinema in a collaboration between anthropological long observation fieldwork with an artistic and aesthetic language form, as a new possibility of representation and a new kind of positioning of the participant-observers.

The Symposium's authors-researchers proposed autonomous studies, searching to institutionalise the desire of determination of the subject that is in -a paradoxical way- of the ontological being in a continuous construction of experimental visual anthropology.

As oppose to having a finite definition like most other practices, experimental ethnography appears to be defined by a series of questions. At the Symposium the questions from the audience were of an ethical nature. For example, the subjectivity is portrayed in the use of montage where the filmmaker is continually making a choice. This subjection can cause inaccuracy. Emphasis on authenticity gives mandatory guidelines to uphold, but there

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Ramsey during the Symposium.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Mirza & Brad Butler : [www.mirza-butler.net](http://www.mirza-butler.net)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/programmation/scientific-events/past-events/colloques-et-symposium/nouvelles-visions-anthropologie-art-et-film-experimental.html>

can be an imposition when implementing our perception.

In conclusion, an answer possibly will be in the films themselves. These films encapsulate a delicate hybridist that depicts the actuality with additional aid from the filmmaker's imposition attempts to shine a light on the several invisible dimensionalities of reality being observed.

*“ Anthropology can be intrusive and provocative.”<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Caterina Pasqualino during the Symposium.