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Roma Snapshots: a Day in Sarajevo, Some Thoughts on Anthropological Filmmaking, Digital Media and Post-War Contexts

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Abstract: The recent war in Bosnia-Herzegovina serves as an undercurrent in this short ethnographic film *Roma Snapshots: a Day in Sarajevo*. The film attempts to enquire into Sarajevan Roma's sense of identification, belonging and memory. It portrays the daily lives of Roma through snapshots of their concurrent realities, where painful memories, laughter and religious beliefs exist side by side. The film comprises of simultaneous screening of four episodes, drawing attention to the filmmaker's dilemma of how to best represent her subjects and which aspects of their lives to highlight. The film addresses visual anthropology's concerns regarding ways of portraying reality and challenges the standard narrative approach to documentary filmmaking. *Roma Snapshots: a Day in Sarajevo* is accompanied by the filmmaker's reflexive essay on anthropological filmmaking, digital media and life in post-war zones.

Keywords: visual anthropology, digital films, Bosnia & Herzegovina, postwar representation

In 2007, during my MA studies in visual anthropology, I conducted ethnographic research for the duration of three months among Roma families living in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. I looked at how certain forms of identification had lost or gained significance for the Sarajevan Roma since the outbreak of the 1992-5 war. The result of my study was an eight-minute film *Roma Snapshots: A Day in Sarajevo,* my first anthropological film.[1] While making the film, my task proved very challenging for three main reasons. First of all, I worked in a post-war context and I wanted to avoid representing my protagonists as 'victims', still living only in the memories of the war, a portrayal which evokes mostly mercy and pity among the viewers and does not allow for a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which the film's subjects live. Secondly, I hoped to distance myself as much as

[1] The film was made in colour, DVD format, screening size: 1,33, screen format: 4:3, sound: stereo, language: Bosnian (with English subtitles).

possible from perpetuating the prejudices about the Roma people that are so often brought to mind through images. Finally, I wanted my film to justify the use of the visual. I wondered what would be the visual purpose of a film made in a post-war context. Why make a film and not write a story about the experiences of those I researched?

At the time of filming I did not know how to edit the materials I gathered, as there was no clear event I could follow, like a wedding, a funeral or a demonstration, with a defined beginning and end. Having filmed four different families over a period of time, I wondered how and whose story should I tell, in what order and why. My ideas regarding what I was trying to convey became clear to me at the editing stage. All the footage for the film was shot in the observational style,[2] which aims to avoid, as much as possible, engagement with various filming and editing techniques offered to us by modern technology in order to keep the visual material as plain and simple as possible. However, at the editing stage, when wanting to convey some of the anthropological ideas I had, this style proved insufficient. In order to overcome the difficulty I encountered, I decided to edit the film in a fairly 'unconventional' manner, at least as it might be perceived in the world of anthropological films.

The final piece is composed of four short films that are screened simultaneously. The recent war in Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as an undercurrent to the four components. The audio, together with a white foggy stripe, serves to navigate the audience's attention toward the 'scene in focus'. Through snapshots of the daily lives of concurrent Roma realities, emotional contrasts are expressed in the four stories where laughter, day-to-day practicalities/hardships, painful memories and religious beliefs coexist side by side. For instance, while in one film the noticeably moved veteran soldier Husen shows the place where he was wounded during a military operation, in a parallel sequence kids in the market mock the displaced population that moved to the city during, or as a consequence of, the war.

The value of a simultaneous screening of the four films as opposed to sequential screening (i.e. one after the other) is rooted in the representation of Roma everyday lives as concurrent 'realities'. There is neither an intentional beginning nor an end to any of the 'stories'. As such, there is no closure. The film is framed by two different shots of Sarajevo, accompanied by sounds of a mosque at the beginning, and sounds of a church at the end. The aim of the Sarajevo shots is to situate my informants' stories within a place as it plays an important role in their lives. The divided sounds of a mosque and a church add metaphorically to the complexity of the post-war social reality in which the main characters of the film live.

Through this style of editing I aimed to explore the possible ways offered by modern, yet fairly simple, technologies for conveying a different kind of anthropological knowledge while focusing especially on conveying an experience, and not only on telling a story. Separately, each part shows some of the forms of identification that gained significance for the Sarajevan Roma in the post-war context. Together the four parts suggest the complexity, diversity, and the dynamics of life in the city after the war. Furthermore, this way of representation visually engages with theoretical debates in visual anthropology: it depicts the complexities of portraying reality and challenges the standard narrative approach to

[2] For more on the observational style see: Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009; Henley 2004; MacDougall 1998; Young 2003.

anthropological filmmaking while raising the dilemma of how best to represent the film's protagonists and which aspects of their lives should be highlighted.

This stylistic editing choice enabled me to confront two of the difficulties I encountered when I set out to shoot a film on the Roma in post-war Sarajevo: 1) how to avoid the representation of war 'victims'; and 2) how not to perpetuate the prejudices about the Roma people. The split screen allowed me to overcome these drawbacks: through snapshots of everyday lives the viewers are introduced to issues that are relevant to many people living in the city, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, as well as to the diversity of experiences existing among the Roma living in Sarajevo. Moreover, the viewers are less likely to pity the protagonists of the film as this style of representation seeks to expose the viewer to the complexities and diversities of forms of identifications in the post-war context without portraying the protagonists as vulnerable victims. This, for instance, is expressed in my conscious decision not to permit the viewer to dwell on any single scene for too long, nor to emotionally engage with the film's protagonists. For instance, if I go back to the previously mentioned scene in which we see the noticeably moved veteran soldier Husen visiting for the first time the place where he was wounded. Just at the height of his excitement, where it is not very clear whether he is about to burst into tears, the focus moves to the next scene. By doing this, I was hoping to alter the viewer's stance as a 'compassionate spectator' (Godmilow 1997), into one that focuses on the causes and consequences of the war on a wider social and political level.

The confusion the film may evoke among viewers is intentional and is in any case embedded not only in the complexity of my informants' identification, but also in my perception of their identification. Thus, I chose not to present a clear, orderly picture where in reality such order and clarity are difficult to discern. However, in order to do this I needed to go beyond the conservative styles of filmmaking in visual anthropology, while making use of some of the advantages offered by modern technology. In what follows I address the relationship between digital video and what I see as conservative styles prevalent in visual anthropology. Finally I briefly discuss the filmmakers' ethical responsibility, especially evident when working with people who are considered to be in vulnerable positions.

Digital Video and Visual Anthropology

Despite the availability of new means of technology that broaden the creative horizons, the majority of films produced by visual anthropologists that I have watched recently still tend to maintain a conservative narrative approach while using a very simple, seemingly less intrusive editing techniques. This often means that despite the obvious visual and aural advantages of the video camera its use is more often than not still restricted to recounting the story of those being filmed: many films continue to show people telling the camera about their experiences instead of the camera attempting to show their experiences through their actions. Anthropologists wishing to overcome this obstacle often use the observational style in which the focus is on actions rather than words. Through this style they generally aim:

> not to judge their subjects in any moral sense, but rather to present and analyze their world-view in such a way as to make it understandable to [the] audience with no direct

> personal experience of that world. Aesthetically too, there is common ground in the sense that observational cinema, like most anthropological texts, is typically plain and unadorned stylistically (Henley 2004, 110).

However, the observational style of filming discourages the use of the great range of fairly simple and accessible filming and editing techniques, and thus omits a great variety of possibilities offered by new technologies. Most anthropological films use a constructed narrative to *show* their protagonists and *tell* their story. It is still very rare to see films in which the editing or the shooting style (namely the choices anthropologists can consciously make once they have acquainted themselves with the relevant issues prevailing among those filmed) *conveys* the experiences of the protagonists as well as *engages* with anthropological theories. Before the video revolution, Biella argues, 'motion picture editing was perilous. To cut in film was so permanent and irreversible that the editors' tool was called a guillotine! Digital video editing though, like interactive linking, is non-destructive. Nothing of the original is lost. The scene is cut and uncut at the same time' (Biella 2009, 54). It seems that despite the accessibility of new technology, most films still stop short of fully utilizing and exploring the advantages video offers with regard to articulating and representing anthropological issues through visual and sound materials. So, ironically, it often seems that both visual and aural dimensions are given secondary importance in anthropological films, while this is in fact what films should do best.

MacDougall has pointed out that before the introduction of digital video, anthropological filmmaking required a lot of very expensive equipment. This meant that anthropologists who wanted to make films were often dependant on budgets provided by television networks, philanthropic foundations, or government funding agencies and therefore, in most cases, they needed to be mindful of the agendas of those who financed them. The process of ethnographic filmmaking was further complicated by the fact that most anthropologists worked with professional crews, whose work was expensive and who were limited in time. This left little room for anthropological exploration with the camera (MacDougall 2001; see also Ruby et. al. 2001).

Nowadays, when anthropological films are made almost exclusively using digital video, it is possible to make professional-looking films that are shot and edited by the anthropologists themselves (MacDougall 2001, 16; Ruby 2008, 4), in which the 'qualities of digital filmmaking are not secondary to the film's meaning but central to the film-maker's ability to give us access to the experiences and responses' (MacDougall 2001, 16) of those researched. The use of new technology affects the relationship between anthropologist filmmakers and their subjects as there is 'a different tone to a relationship established with a group, even if the group is only two' (MacDougall 2001, 17). In addition, a filmmaker that works alone may be more willing to take risks and follow up unexpected opportunities that emerge during her/his research. This is possible not only because the filmmaker works alone, but also due to the low costs of videotapes as opposed to film. Now that anthropologists are free from having to seek very large budgets for their film projects they can be much more creative. To quote MacDougall once again, digital video 'turns responsibility back upon us, the anthropologists and filmmakers, to accept the challenge to produce new, exemplary ethnographic films' (MacDougall 2001, 15).

Jay Ruby, following Peter Biella, suggests that we are ready to go 'beyond ethnographic film' (Ruby 2001, 23). He proposes to expend the style of the films made by anthropologists by abandoning the use of the name 'ethnographic films', and opening up to a wider variety offered by all forms of cinema (Ruby 2008, 3-4). He argues that 'when anthropologists try their hand at film production, they tend to assume that the conventions of documentary realism must be adhered to' while ignoring the possibility to experiment (Ruby 2008, 3). He suggests that 'anthropological knowledge is too complex to be packaged within the conventions of documentary realism' (Ruby 2008, 5).

(Instead of) Conclusion

Digital media allows one to be less dependent on large budgets, on the agendas of those behind the budgets and on the limitations posed by older technology. It also makes an individual filmmaker more responsible for the content and the form of what s/he shows. Anthropologist filmmakers should make use of the advantages offered by digital techniques and put them in the service of anthropological theories and more complex visual/aural ideas. In doing so, anthropologists working in a post-war context (or focusing on supposedly vulnerable subjects) should avoid making films which 'produce audiences of compassionate spectators of the dilemmas of others' (Godmilow 1997). Godmilow, talking mostly about non-fiction films whose subjects generate 'caring audiences', argues that those films produce 'a kind of mourning moment, a nostalgia for the past, in which one can find no useful questions or analyses that we could employ in today's realities. And there's no active audience produced - just a sort of dreamy, passive audience that gains a sweet, sad knowingness […] but not a knowledge that provides insight into the economic, social, and racial structures that produced so many dead bodies, such waste of property, and such difficult political problems for the future' (Godmilow 1997).

It is the responsibility of anthropologist filmmakers to visually motivate and provide the audience with means for more than just compassion, on the one hand, and feelings of 'thank god this is not happening to me', on the other. Godmilow argues that there are 'comfortable and classic contract arrangements' between the viewers and the films made by most non-fiction filmmakers in which 'the audience is invited to believe: I learn from this film because I care about the issues and people involved and want to understand them better; therefore, I am a compassionate member of society, not part of the problem described, but part of the solution'. She further argues that 'the real contract, the more hidden one, enables the viewer to feel: "thank God that's not me"' (Godmilow 1997).

While *Roma Snapshots: A Day in Sarajevo* certainly does not fully explore all the possibilities that digital filmmaking technology has to offer, the extent to which it does, hopefully, allows me to go beyond representing my protagonists only as 'victims', and challenges the boundaries of conventional anthropological films even if only through my trial to use the advantages of digital video in an exploratory manner. I believe that one should dare to push the limits of convention in order to explore in the sea of possibilities, even if it means that one may fail. As suggested by Jean Rouch, 'filmmakers who attempt something difficult have a right to fail' (Rouch in MacDougall 2001, 18).

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