

*Painting over black and white photographs:
Is this what the ethnographer does?¹*

*A comparative analysis of the films: Dead Birds by Robert Gardner (1964),
Reassemblage by Trinh T. Minh-ha (1982), and Photo Wallahs
by David and Judith MacDougall (1992).*

The three presented films constitute significant paradigms of the history and development of ethnographic film-making, mirroring in parallel the restless journey of anthropological thought. Each situated in its temporality, reflects its technical as well as theoretical frustrations.

Gardner's film about the Dani people living in Grand Valley of the Baliem, is grounded at the brim of post-coloniality. It presents a concrete separation of the researcher and the researched. Almost the entirety of the 83min film is narrated, as a "voice of god" describes, interprets and assumes how the nearly voiceless and un-subtitled locals, act and think. As Karl Heider(2006) explains, the bi-communal warfare of the Dani was shot at different occasions, and it was edited and narrated in a way to seem like all the action took place in a continuous flow. The above-mentioned methodological decision can partially be attributed to the technical limitations of the 1960's asynchronous sound capture and the scarce length of film², but I would argue that the material representation should be considered in an intertwined dynamic with the cognitive signifiers and constructions of the representer. The minimal use of handheld shots, the use of eagle-eye views and zoom, in Robert Gardner's film is (sub)consciously creating distance and separation from the Dani people -dispite the use of protagonists- as if we are examining them. But what is the relationship of Gardner with the Dani?³ How did he gain access to the community? How did the

¹ A reference to the dying art of coloring black and white photographs portrayed in "Photo Wallahs" by David and Judith MacDougall.

² Especially prior to the 1960s and for a respectable time after, the sound could only be recorded on a separate device, usually operated by a second person. In film cinematography the film is generally a scarce item (compared to digital formats) especially in the case of 16mm film (used in "Reassemblage").

³ Karl Heider(2006), describes an incident when the Dani needed pigs for a ceremony and the filmmakers provided them in order to record it.

locals react to his and his camera's presence?⁴ None of these questions are answered in the film. Everything is mediated through a harmonic sequence of expositionally narrated events.

The above-mentioned methodological decisions are expressing a theoretical and material temporality of ethnographic filmmaking and anthropological thought, when culture was mostly perceived as "*the essential tool for making other*"; (Abu-Lughod, Lila, 1991). A framework soon to be disrupted by the so called "*Crisis of representation*".

Minh-ha created her film "*Reassemblage*" in 1982, "*speaking nearby and not about*" (Minh-ha, T., 1982) the women of the Sereer people in Senegal. Through her experimental approach she radically challenges the idea of what a documentary is or can be as she participates in and reflects on the shift in anthropological thought of the time. As the title suggests "*Reassemblage*" constitutes an impressionist collage of a seemingly random array of quick cuts, containing juxtapositions of extreme close-ups, general shots, silences and empty frames. Similarly to *Dead Birds* Minh-ha's film has asynchronous sound -usually unrelated to the image-, significant narration and the locals are not subtitled; but through similar means she conveys a whole different meaning. As she is aware of the supposed "objectivity" of the technological equipment and the ethnographic approach (Minh-ha, T., 1991), she creatively deconstructs this narrative. Her voice-overs act as a tool of wonder rather than explanation, she recounts stories of the Sereer as if she overheard them, as if she is not sure about the validity of her sayings and many times without portraying them visually. At the same time and via this approach, Minh-ha questions the very essence of ethnography on how meaning, truth and ideas are mediated, especially in complex post-colonial settings, signifying concerns similar to those of the Comaroffs and George Marcus regarding the need of a "*multi-dimensional*" (Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J., 2003) and "*multi-sited*" (Marcus, G., 2012) ethnography.

Through this journey we arrive at David and Judith MacDougall's "*Photo Wallahs*", a playful exploration of the perception of the art and profession of photography at

⁴ A fascinating addition to this film is the return of Rober Gerner at the Grand Valley of the Dani people 28 years after: Gardner, R. (2015). *Dead Birds Re-encountered*. San Francisco, California, USA: Kanopy Streaming.

Mussoorie, a hill station of northern India. In this film the concerns raised by the turmoil of the “*Crisis of representation*” in anthropological thought seem to digested -but by no means overcome- as the filmmakers experiment with different modes of mediation. In “*Photo Wallahs*” we experience the locals more freely and with more intimacy through the extensive use of handheld shots and synchronous sound where the non-English language is mostly subtitled. The filmed subjects are equipped with wireless mics allowing them to freely interact with the environment as well as other people. Additionally, the film becomes self-aware of its creation process by incorporating “bloopers” and the presence (vocal) of the filmmakers. These techniques are enabling an attempt to shift from a “flat” observational stance to a more complex social experience (MacDougall, D., 2019).

Through the appreciation and analysis of these landmark ethnographic films we witness the fascinating and troublesome journey of ethnographic filmmaking and anthropological thought in the second half of the 20th century. Their statements and concerns are still lingering, sparking debates regarding the positionality of the researcher, the modes of mediation, the production of knowledge and validity as well as the power and limitations of recording instruments. Which are the opportunities, but also traps, that arise from technological innovation? How can lived experience and affectional exchange be conveyed through space-time?

References

Films

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Further Viewing

- David MacDougall on Filmmaking(2014), Earthsayers.tv, YouTube:
<https://youtu.be/TllyonuU2pc?si=ITwqaXCQk6qllh0f>
- What was documentary? An elegy for Robert Gardner(2016), Kevin B. Lee, Sight and Sound, YouTube:
<https://youtu.be/S2RGo6QqtQQ?si=l3n7v2MgF87We7wy>
- Low Definition, Silences, and Poetic Evocations in Trinh T. Minh-ha's Feminist Films(2021), Leonie, Bristol Doctoral College (BDC), YouTube:
<https://youtu.be/-znbEx6H7Pw?si=hZWYc7XMHQg7T6df>

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