

How I saw it

ESSAY: Steffen Moestrup examines the borderland between visual anthropology and documentary filmmaking and finds a wealth of interesting and useful reflections.



Anthropology and documentary film have always looked at and learned from one another. Visual anthropology, defined as anthropologists making use of, for instance, film and photography to collect data in their studies came into being at the moment these technologies became available. But much has changed in recent years - both in the way visual anthropology uses the film medium and indeed within the documentary film inspired by anthropology. More recently, we have seen a wealth of documentary filmmakers with a background in anthropology, who have created such films as *Afghan Muscles* (2006), *Pig Country* (2010), *How to Pick Berries* (2010), *Mumbai Disconnected* (2009), *Pit No. 9* (2010) and *Flags, Feathers and Lies* (2009). The films are different in many ways, and it would not make any sense to put them into the same box just because they are all made by people with a background in anthropology. But something special between anthropology and documentary film is occurring, and, perhaps especially in the Scandinavian countries, is hard to overlook according to Jakob Høgel, who is creative director of New Danish Screen, a support programme at the Danish Film Institute with a specific emphasis on talent and originality. Høgel, who has a background in anthropology, sees an interesting development in visual anthropology:

“Originally visual anthropology and ethnographic films were defined by the fact that they were made by anthropologists and depicted indigenous peoples. Most of these films were boring, purely descriptive and plagued by a false

notion that the camera simply had to be a fly on the wall and only used to collect data. Now we see a generation of visual anthropologists who are far more interested in the analytic dimensions and are more experimental in their approach to film. The camera is seen not merely as a collection tool but as an entirely new way to reflect,” says Jakob Høgel, who believes that there is a continuum between distinctly anthropological films and documentary films. The anthropologist has a starting point in the scientific and the analytical, whereas the documentary filmmaker will often focus on the dramatic structure and the cinematic form. It is in the meeting between these two approaches that interesting things happen:

“Anthropology can give documentary an analytical level and some methods by which you can get the analytic into the dramatic structure. If the filmmaker does not become aware of what is analytically interesting in the topic they are about to make a film on, one is left to random events,” says Jakob Høgel.

Parts of the documentary production can be said to have much in common with the anthropologist’s fieldwork, which is always a cultural encounter between an outsider and a “native”, whether it is an African tribal group or workers in a factory in Europe. Both the anthropological fieldwork as well as documentary filmmaking takes place as part of an investigation based on personal contact, and during this study, dilemmas about relationships will occur. When anthropologists introduce a camera to the fieldwork, the camera’s presence is able to put these dilemmas into focus. Film

makes the fieldwork extremely obvious and the anthropologist’s presence is made clear, leading to an almost built-in level of reflection. You cannot hide as documentary filmmaker or as anthropologist. You could not hide as an exclusively writing anthropologist either, but the camera manifests the presence in a more radical way.

With the camera as a companion the anthropologist and filmmaker will likely be more able to reflect and discuss what they saw and how they saw it. From Jacob Høgel’s point of view there is still much unknown territory that anthropologists and filmmakers can visit together;

“We’ve seen quite a number of films where the anthropological analysis is put into a dramatic film structure, but now I would like to see the analysis carried out in more experimental forms, for instance as database structures, more essayistic films and interactive forms,” says Jakob Høgel.

One of the anthropologists who might be able to fulfil that desire, is Christian Suhr. Suhr’s PhD project deals with divine healing among Muslims in Denmark, and Suhr looks both at how Danish Muslims meet the psychiatric system and how different forms of Islamic exorcism play a role in the healing process. Early in the process Suhr learned that the environment he studied was a visually extraordinary place, and it led him to include the camera right from the beginning:

“Such a world full of magic, malicious spirits and evil eyes can be difficult to describe in words, unless you are a very talented writer. Film can

From left to right: *Mumbai Disconnected*; *Descending with Angels*; *Unity through Culture*; (two images)



be very useful to capture those sensuous aspects of reality that cannot be grasped in writing. My project is, however, concerned with the things that actually cannot be directly perceived, for instance the divine soul, biomedicine or invisible spirits. I am particularly interested in how the limits of the image and the film - its framing and its delimitation of time - can be used to push our perception beyond the sensuous, the audible and the visible," says Christian Suhr.

According to Suhr, film's most significant contribution to anthropology is its capacity to generate an experience of the invisible as being invisible. The world which anthropologists make visible and intelligible by using their concepts and theories can be destabilized in interesting ways by disruptive film montage:

"Audiovisual media are less definite than the written word, and are better able to obtain the indeterminacy that is always part of human life. Writing and visual media abstract in different ways. While the written word tends to highlight rational, logical chains of cause and effect, audiovisual media often emphasize emotional and sensuous aspects of reality," says Christian Suhr, who is currently browsing through all the material he has shot during his fieldwork and becoming aware of a number of observations that he had not noticed when he did the fieldwork:

"It is quite clear that in the editing phase new thoughts and reflections emerge and in this sense editing is analysis," says Suhr. And the dynamics between on one hand dealing with the reality that Suhr saw when he found himself in the middle of the fieldwork and the

reality that has now taken a cinematic form and can be viewed on a screen are not problematic according to the anthropologist:

"There is not a single unbiased point from where we can perceive reality in pure form, so I think film has equally legitimate access to reality as non-film. Not that film is better or worse than other media, but I can see that the film does certain things. Films are made both of those filming and those being filmed, and this creates a co-presence of perspectives and multiple impressions. At the same time, the camera is able to capture many nuances, also of communicative nature which may be outside the realm of words but lie in gesture, physicality, and emotional expression," says Suhr.

This more subjective approach to 'truth' is very much something that visual anthropology has embraced from the film world. It is from experimental and artistic documentaries such as Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) or Werner Herzog's *Bells from the Deep* (1993) that anthropologists are inspired to adopt new cinematic approaches. Film becomes a powerful device for challenging our thinking and perception when it grasps the image not simply as a mirror-reflection of the world but as an audio-visual concept. But as Jacob Høgel said, Christian Suhr also believes that there are still significant differences between being a documentary filmmaker and being an anthropological filmmaker:

"We are not artists nor directors but thoroughbred anthropologists who happen to use a modern medium. We might have a higher level of commitment to the people we

examine, which is for instance reflected by the prolonged fieldwork. We do not compromise for the audience's sake. All tools and filmic forms are chosen because they open up perspectives on reality, which are useful in anthropological terms but not necessarily in dramatic terms," says Christian Suhr and continues:

"My fieldwork extends over one and a half years. I filmed whenever I found something interesting without really knowing how recordings would fit into a filmic structure. The final project will be put together according to my analytical interests, not according to any externally imposed drama. I think the time factor is significant. If you want to know something about human life in a given environment it is not enough to go there for 14 days and just bring along a skilled photographer. You have to live with people, eat, act, and preferably dress like them, disconnect from your own reality and immerse yourself in their reality. Of course, you can never enter the mind or body of another person but to get as close as possible you need to participate in people's lives over a long period of time and let the camera grow into your relationship. If there is a depth or value to ethnographic film it probably derives from the time spent in the field," says Christian Suhr, who after his completed dissertation is the prime mover at a future center for visual anthropology in Aarhus, Denmark. Here it will hopefully be possible to further cultivate the interesting and resilient intersection between anthropology and documentary films.

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