Transcultural Montage : The uses of filmic montage in conveying diversity and mutuality

(W086)

How to 'cut' without loosing your head?

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In a lecture which I gave during a congress from medical ethnology, I illustrated my fieldwork with a couple of minutes of an ethnographic film, which I filmed during the years of my thesis[i].

The film is about a women who is practising a form of ethno medicine, characteristic for Central Europe and the Balkans, a method called *salivanje strave* ("melting the fear") on Serbian language. This method consists of a technique of incantation, made from ritual behavior and of a purposely-pronounced text called *basma*-s, charms, of which goal is healing the person (Vivod, 2008, 238).

The healer-women combines the therapy with a discourse of historical –political – religious character. Partially it is the same doctrine used by the Serbian Orthodox Church, based on ethno-myths and a certain political, historical collective opinion.

I used inserts from the final cut – the final version of the film – and pieces made utterly – a sit-down interview where the healer is explaining the 'doctrine' of her therapy.

During the filming of the sit-down interview the healer was dressed differently then usual[ii] - she knew that I had the intention of filming her, so she dressed up, and even put on a high heal shoes with high-pitched ending. Now, what is important to add that the usual dressing 'style' of this woman is very much different: generally she was dressed very modestly (long sleeves, long skirts), without any jewelry (just a wooden cross on her chest) without any 'fancy' detail… I even wrote a chapter in my thesis about the hiding of every female 'attribute' in her dressing, which was making her much older then she was… At that time my hypothesis was that her way to dress up 'asexually' was intentional, to give her a couple of more years, to obtain the image, the looks of the

'*baba*' (old women in Slavic languages) the incarnation of a traditional healer, which would give her a look of 'authenticity' (Vivod, 2005)….

During the sit-down interview I have filmed mostly her face, her bust, but the detail of the high-pitched shoes was so particular that I couldn't take my eyes off, so I have filmed it too. In the final cut I inserted intentionally the scene with a shoe.

At the congress the shoe-scene has 'costed' me dearly: a colleague in the same workshop who had a lecture, and also had a presentation of a piece of her film, pointed out that the scene with the shoe was unnecessary, very 'not objective' from my part, and that I was even wrong to cut it 'in' in the final version….

I responded with the same argument which I have exposed *supra*, but my answer was not convincing –maybe being a bit short. The colleague remained skeptical, looking coldly behind her glasses.

So why I did left it in, deliberately, the scene with the shoe?

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"For a long time I used to go to bed early[iii]" (Proust) and I considered that visual ethnography 'serves' to the written one, helping us actually to be able to remember better what we saw on the field. The recorded visual material was a support of a word-based discipline, just an 'illustration' for a written work. I was taught also that the montage should be avoided as much as possible and it is wrong for the ethnologist to 'play around' with the montage techniques.

With time I understood that I can't produce ethnographical films, and above all, research films[iv] and that the cutting of the 'raw' material is simply unavoidable.

To find out what exactly montage is, I followed a classical ethnological methodology, based on a fieldwork inquiries: I have interviewed persons whom the montage is allowed and even it makes part of their profession. The interview included persons, professionals as documentary film directors, assistant of directors, TV montageurs and photo reporters[v].

I was interested in concrete examples from their personal experience, their common definition what exactly the montage is, what their emphasized in the practice of cutting and editing – briefly, I was interested in a *human experienc*e of the montage.

I will avoid summing up all the elements of these interviews, and I will not enter into a deeper analysis of the collected material; I will mention just the definitions, the main expressions which continually re-emerged during the conversation about how a person could define with his/her own words the term of 'montage'.

The terms employed to describe 'montage' referred mainly to the description of the meaning of this idiom but also to its content. The expressions as the 'order' or 'set of rules', 'impact'[vi], 'meaning' came out during the conversations, as the terms which helped to gave a general definition and a description of the term 'montage'. Montage was defined as the "images in an order respecting a set of rules possessing its interior logic[vii]" and it was repeatedly pointed out by different interlocutors that "the montage is as important as the filming, if not, even more important".

One of the dimensions added to the term of 'montage' is the time and the timing of a shot. F.i. the long shot is called 'real length' shot because it's dimension of time and duration relates directly on its content, described as 'real', 'true' or 'exact'. The longer the scene/the shoot is, the more 'real', vivid, more genuine would be the message what the author is trying to transmit with it.

The term of 'consciousness' especially in the talk about the length of a shot came out frequently and was referred to the esthetical 'feeling' of the author and his/her 'visual education'. An author conscious of esthetics of a shot can underline the beauty with a long, uncut shot. His/her esthetic consciousness comes from his/her visual education. The 'visual education' (*vizuelna kultura* serb. -expression of an interviewed person) is the visual erudition, the 'literacy', the knowledge and the ability of an individual to recognize and to interpret a visual information[viii]. One another criteria of a successful montage is the dexterity[ix] of an author and his actual knowledge of the technique of the montage – his/her conscious use of the set of rules of the montage.

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Analyzing the data collected during these interviews about the human experience of the montage, the following short definition of the term appears: arrangement of the shots which are edited together and which goal is to make a coherent 'visual story'[x] - establishing interiorly logical relationships between the images which are to be interpreted by the viewer ship[xi].

Straightforwardly said, the montage would be the resume, the choice of the collected data, depending on what the film author thinks is important, and what kind of message he/she would like to transmit to the public. The multitude of information is reduced, so the most important information is 'cut' down. The montage is the control of the information (of the shots) which will be 'passed on' destined to a specific viewer ship. Now, how this control of the information, of the filmed material is established? What is the model with which the person is guided in ranking data elements in terms of their significance and filtering out the data?

Semioticaly said the message can't function until the viewer ship distinguishes it. It then triggers cognitive activity to interpret the data input and so converts it into meaningful information.

What I would like to say that the montage is established on a social convention - which involves matching the signs/ the information received against existing patterns and their meanings held in memory - learned and understood within the community, it generates a cognitive activity referring to the 'visual education' common for all human beings in touch with some kind of visual expression or technology.

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Walter J. Ong (2000) had written that writing is a technology that structures thought, then filming and especially editing would be a technology that structures thought and the concept of the experienced reality. As MacDougall (MacDougall,1969-70:27) emphasized, "movies give a more or less complete picture of reality by adding sensory experience to analytical data and by exploring various levels of human experience."

The experienced reality – experienced by the author- is in part external – the accepted and a widespread 'code', which is the 'visual education' of how a world is to be seen, and especially filmed. The internal experience of the reality is of the author him/herself; it is about how an individual experiences the world around him/her.

The camera is often referred as a 'mechanical eye', mimetically reproducing the human eye; the montage would be then the extraction, the 'essentialisation' of what this 'eye' ingurgitated. The montage would be then a procedure similar to the brain functions, a kind of language which stimulates and reclaims cognitive process[xii].

The author brings out trough the montage a subtextual – better said a 'subvisual' meaning which is to be decoded by the viewer. The viewer ship then interprets what they have seen, to attribute later a meaning to it.

In the case of the conventional ethnology where the author express himself through his writing, with the use of the language, depends of many elements: f.i. the richness of his vocabulary and other linguistic capacities (e.g. if the author is a native speaker of the language in which he/she writes - he/she will use the language more easily) and a considerable amount of writing-talent.

For the visual ethnology the montage would be the mimetic simulation of the language. Every shot, every cut is a sentence, or a message depending also on many elements: f.i. the filming conditions (proximity, light, s.f.) the visual education of the author, the dexterity of the author during the filming, the montage. The subvisual meaning which is transmitted by the choice of what to cut out and what is left in the final version, determines the message what the author is trying to transmit.

The final cut is the result of use of the social convention of montage, how the author understood and reproduced this convention, of his visual education, and of nature of the message, which he/she tries to transmit. The montage is 'speaking' not only about the content of a scene or sequence; it is communicating information about the author as well by the choices he made during the procedure, and from the 'style' of the montage, similarly as the writing in conventional ethnology. Cutting, or not cutting, is a way to pass on some kind of information.

Now in the case of the shoe-scene, what I wanted to 'transmit' to my eventual public, not only the statement of the person which I interviewed, but also the complete 'scenography', the objects around the person, and every other detail of which I could get a grip of. My goal was to transmit the 'scene' completely, in fact, what was 'complete' for me. The way in which the person was dressed, her jewelry, and even the shoes, belonged to the unity of the scene for me. The elements of the scene which captured my eye determined the choices of the shot which entered in the final cut. I pointed out what I considered as important to be seen.

In the conventional ethnography, the desire to attain objectivity is the most important task in the fieldwork. "The selective inclusion or exclusion of visual data constitutes an aspect of this view of objectivity" (Tiffany and Adams, 1996: 174) (Jules-Rosette, McVey, Arbitrario, 2002: 124)

There is a doubt "whether objectification of the events is the best means of presenting them" (Jules-Rosette, McVey, Arbitrario, 2002: 126). In the shoe-scene case, if the conditions have permitted me to film the healer-women from the top of her head to her toe I would probably make a shot of the whole body. So the high-pitched shoes would be clearly present on the image. But the space, the room where the sit-down interview was taken, was limited (I was about a meter far from the healer-women, and the camera was in front of me), so I was constraint to film only her bust, and later, the high-pitched shoes separately.

My presence, the presence of the camera, influenced a different conduct (in this case, a modified 'look') of the women from my observational subject. It was a 'stimulant' which created the scene. "The camera does not only record what happens; it also serves as a stimulant or catalyst in a work in which reveals what Samuel Michaud calls 'la realité en train de se faire' ".(Forsdick, 1997:315)

The healer –women dressed up, I presume to make herself 'pretty' for the filming, although she was filmed by myself on many occasion, during days and weeks and months, in her usual clothing code.

But also what was more relevant for me it was the transformation of this woman which I have observed during years and which femininity became more and more expressed. The high-pitched shoes were the most surprising element, but during the last ten years the metamorphosis of the healer-woman from an ascetic-looking person to a feminine woman became more apparent. From the modestly dressed, short haired, hardly bearing any jewelry person, living in a small village in Serbia, she transformed herself to a more feminine woman. I must add also that in the meantime from three children she became a mother of five…

Why this transformation, is another question, maybe irrelevant to our subject. Nevertheless, I could presume that at the beginning of her 'career' of a traditional healer, she was nurturing, on purpose, her image of an asexual, older woman, closer to the image

of the 'proper woman'[xiii] (woman in menopause – considered to be fitting for this kind of activity), more suitable to the image of the traditional healer (Vivod,2005). Or, a more earthly explanation would be that she gained during the years of her activity of a popular healer more prosperity and she could offered to herself a bit of 'fancy' clothes and jewelry…

I opted to show the shoes separately, making a 'cut in' during the montage. Taking in consideration my previous work about her and feeling that this is a reality in course of happening, I determined what was important to show. I was witnessing a metamorphosis of the subject of my observations and I was eager to make from it a visual record while I could, and also I wanted to point out the elements which I considered as important be seen from my future viewer ship. "For Geertz (1973:27) the ethnographer determines the correct balances among observation, exegesis, description, and explanation in the final account." (Jules-Rosette, McVey, Arbitrario, 2002: 129) In hope, that the balance was not overweighed by the high-pitched shoe….

Was I wrong, or did I did well, was not important. The importance was to pass my message trough. And what was the message? Plainly said: what an odd looking shoes on a 'traditional' healer…

So cut as you think you should, let 'your message' through, just don't loose you head.

Ethnographique film= to improve our vision (Christian Suhr Nielsen)

Using montage – raison to use it

Crossculturality= viewing and sending out differently

James Tamis/Famis

Read Descola about perception

Douglas Horner – visual sociologist

Long takes= long shots

Mitchell- what are images, what are images to us?

Observation=visual& vision

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[i] « Biljana, la femme –guérisseuse », 35', presented at: 'Europe and the World' 9th Biennial Conference of European Association of Social Ethnologists 18 -21 September 2006′ Bristol, UK

[ii] I studied and visited regularly this particular healer-woman since 1999 until last year. In this way I have filmed her for several occasions during the years….

[iii] With the famous sentence 'Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure […]" begins the "Swan's Way' (*De côté de chez Swan*) of Marcel Proust.

[iv] "Collier and Collier (1999: 152) make the distinction between 'research' film and 'ethnographic' film, calling 'research' films the type made to contain relatively undisturbed processes and behavior to develop information, whereas 'ethnographic' films create a narrative selected by the filmmaker- producer. Research films are edited films, meant for specific research purposes and for a specialized viewership (Crawford, 2003: 74)." (Sooryamoorthy, 2007:550-551)

[v] The interviews were made during spring and summer 2008 in Novi Sad, Serbia

[vi] Interview with D.S. age 58, Novi Sad, Serbia, photo reporter, employed the word in Serbian '*težina*' which could be translated as the 'weight' meaning the importance, the impact….

[vii] Definition gave by an interviewed person

[viii] Definition gave by an interviewed person

[ix] The word 'craft' ('zanat' serb.) was employed.

[x] The term of 'visual story' refers not only on a actual 'story' from its beginning to its end, but also to a message which to be transmitted by the images.

[xi] "However, films mean different thing to different viewers. While they portray social conditions they also tap the personal conditions and sensitivities of the viewers (Ill,1981:74)" in (Sooryamoorthy, 2007:548)

[xii] F.i. the Kuleshov effect: Kuleshov intercut shots of the expressionless face of an actor with various other shots such as soup, a coffin, and a pretty girl. He discovered that the film viewership interpreted the actor's single expression as hungry, sad, happy, etc., according to the images with which it was associated. This became known as the "Kuleshov effect," an important contribution to montage theory.

[xiii] 'proper women' – *čista žena* serb. is the women in menopause, and without any sexual relations