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A dialogue between anthropologists, visual anthropologists and non-academic practitioners: a case from documentary filmmakers in India

This paper builds upon some of my PhD findings, which seek to locate Indian filmmaking practices within the discipline of anthropology; but it also moves beyond my PhD argument and makes use of other ethnographic encounters (with anthropologists and other academic fields outside the South Asian context) which at present are re-directing my interest towards a more collaborative relationship between anthropologists interested in film, and image-making practitioners, outside the academia (and in particular in India), interested in academic debates.

Accordingly, I shall combine examples coming from the filmmaking context in South Asia with some new approaches emerging within visual anthropology. My intention in this paper is to suggest a more 'inter' and 'intra' disciplinary approach – that is, what I call a 'multi-disciplinary anthropology'. Moreover, I also aim to engage with anthropological debates that seek to engage more practically with public spaces asking questions on how to connect with a general audience or how to valorise anthropologists outside the academic circuits.

More at a personal level, my intention here is to begin a dialogue with an audience of anthropologists who can help me to better locate myself within the discipline. In fact, even though I am at the moment naming myself as a 'visual anthropologist' working on film, I am still unsure about the validity of this appellative for someone like me whose research-focus is on film practices (but not within visual anthropology) and who does not define herself as a practitioner as much as an academic. Historically, the majority of anthropologists who got involved in filmmaking practices, namely ethnographic filmmaking, have been practitioners talking about their films or their colleagues' films. Arguably, this tendency is still existent today amongst those specialised in visual anthropology, which, occasionally, make my position in this sub-field unease. On the other hand, my work is also pushing me towards the discipline of media studies, which

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is increasingly enlarging its horizon and including anthropologists in their departments and ethnographic methods as an important methodology to supplement their teaching syllabus. However, in my own experience in media studies departments, it appears that, when it gets to research, my anthropological approach makes media academics sceptical on the real contribution I can make to the international media scholarship. Hence, they ask me to re-think of my research from a more specific media perspective. This makes me step into the field of 'media anthropology' – or 'anthropology of media' – which probably is the one in which I would see myself most fit. Yet, when this happens, the issue of film arises. In fact, since the development of this sub-field, film practices have hardly been taken seriously by anthropologists dedicated to media – either because visual anthropology was already established and giving importance to films, or because film studies as an older discipline than media never merged with media studies. Without providing further examples (with for instance the field of anthropology and art or history but also documentary and film studies etc.), I would like to stress that in the past few years I have actually found myself connected much more with anthropology (without any 'visual' or 'media' or 'art' etc. as a prefix or specification of the field) as a discipline dealing with representation (or performance, in Fabian's sense of 'giving form to'), than any other field of research. Accordingly, I believe it is time for me to make an argument that can enable me (and others) to begin a dialogue with anthropologists not directly involved, or interested, in film, arts and media practices, and position myself in a more multidisciplinary anthropology.

In order to attain this, in this paper I will highlight the analogies existent between newer generations of visual/media anthropologists claiming recognition with the established discipline, and Indian documentary film practitioners, outside anthropology, getting closer to the anthropological investigation. In doing this, I shall highlight the limitations of (visual) anthropology in the way is taught from within, and the way the discipline projects itself outside the academia. I will eventually propose an historical revival of anthropological practices of the late xix century as a way to better position visual anthropology within British cultural anthropology and to open up

possibilities of collaborations between institutions and art/film/media practitioners outside the academic field.

Visual Experimentation within Visual Anthropology

Within the fields of media, arts, films and anthropology in the past ten years there has been much debate concerning the way in which digital platforms are critically affecting the customary format of ethnographic and/or documentary films (Russell 1999; Pink 2006, 2011; Banks & Ruby 2011). In particular, anthropologists have started to investigate the ways in which art and film intersect with anthropological interests (Schneider 2008; Grasseni 2004, 2011; Ramey 2011; Basu 2008, Wright & Schneider 2010). At present, these new perspectives are challenging conventional understandings of ethnographic films as well as that of images at large – resembling debates that emerged in visual anthropology in the late 1970s (cf. Gross 1981) and early 1990s (cf. Taylor 1994), which conceived the discipline of visual anthropology as being more broadly concerned with image-making. In doing this, these debates also seem to overlap with the current discourse about digital image-making practices emerging at a global level. Favero (2009) has argued how, in the light of the use of new digital technology, practices of 'image-making' have blurred the boundaries between filmmaking, videomaking, photography and other visual representations (see also Basu 2008, Ramey 2011).

In particular, it seems that a new generation of early-career researchers has nurtured an interest in the interstices between anthropology, film, art and media. An van Dienderen (2004), Paolo Favero (2009), Laurent Van Lancker (2013 forthcoming), Alyssa Grossman (2014 forthcoming) are only some of those anthropologists who, at present, are critically intervening in the field anthropology emphasising a more hermeneutical (and 'emotional-sensorial') relationship with film-subjects and audiences. As put by Van Lancker this an approach which is "concerned with producing knowledge via experience" (2013: 135). Building on performative theories, Van Dienderen calls this approach 'performative ethnography' where, following a sort of Fabian legacy, the

performance does not 'express' anything but rather is "the text at the moment of its actualization" (2004: 58).

Despite their innovative investigations in relation to both the visual and anthropology, in different ways the written and audio-visual work of these 'new' visual anthropologists also laments the traditional way in which the discipline perceives films – that is, to paraphrase Chris Wright, as composed by two *separated*, rather than complementary, elements, the 'anthropological relevance' and the 'aesthetic composition' (1998: 16). Accordingly, early-career visual anthropologists often escape from their original discipline, meeting other academic environments – whether media, art or film studies. In many of my personal encounters with some of these academic-practitioners this point was often reiterated with statements such as, "the RAI ethnographic film festival now accepts my films but always places them in a 'special' category rather than making them fit in the well-established categories of material culture or the Basil Wright prize"! Similarly, someone else pointed out to me, "I am glad I got a job in a film/media department. At least I can keep doing what I am doing yet without fighting for making my voice heard – as it happens in many anthropology departments".

For all these reasons, these early-career scholars are also taking distance from the academia and, in contrast, are increasingly establishing a relationship with art-practitioners. Generally, this occurs through art exhibitions, conferences and festivals. Some of the key moments of these encounters can be identified in conferences such as '*Fieldworks: Dialogues between Art and Anthropology'* (Tate Modern, London 2003), '*Beyond Text? Synaesthetic and Sensory Practices in Anthropology'* (Manchester 2007), and panels such as '*Exhibition Experiments: Technologies and Cultures of Display*' (for ASA 2003, Manchester) or what I have recently co-organised with a more south Asian focus, *Screening India through digital image-making* (for ASA 2012, New Delhi) and *From the inside looking out… Filmic visions of South Asia's tacit "other"* (for ECSAS 2012, Portugal).

In other words, visual anthropologists seem to be crossing other disciplines as well as initiating more dialogues with practitioners not affiliated with anthropology. If on the one hand, this turn opens more audio-visual possibilities

and theoretical thinking outside anthropology, on the other, I argue, it does not help to innovate the discipline of anthropology towards a more multidisciplinary and audio-visual approach. In doing this, early-career researchers who find new hosts in other disciplines and art-practices, also limit the possibilities for visual anthropology to set up its own criteria of evaluation within the broader discipline of social anthropology. I will explore this point further in a moment, but before doing this, allow me to spend some words on the concrete ways in which visual anthropologists-practitioners meet non-anthropological practitioners by giving some examples coming from the Indian subcontinent.

Experimentation in Documentary Film Practices in India

Documentary filmmakers and audio-visual artists in India are urban-based activists and intellectuals (Sheth 1984) similar to what Sinha (2000) calls the 'Indian intelligentsia'. They are cultural activists (Ginsburg 1997, Bharucha 1998), working towards social change and in support of those alternative perspectives on communications which Bel et al (2005) find lacking in the Indian media discourse. Historically, audio-visual image-makers have set up alternative communications paths in India. As I argued in my doctoral research, their film activities have travelled from government institutions to cinema halls, artist circuits, political campaigns, travelling exhibitions, film festivals and art galleries (Battaglia 2012a). Amongst other things, my doctoral research has suggested that documentary film practitioners in India have moved towards directions similar to those undertaken by anthropologists, especially those interested in visual practices. Within the community of documentary filmmakers in India, indeed, the performative or dialogic aspect of filmmaking in relation to its audience is one of the topics debated most. "How to engage with an audience?" is the question which documentary filmmakers ponder most, while discussing how to make or edit a film. "How will an audience respond to this film?" is the second question documentary filmmakers debate amongst themselves, as believers in the idea that audiences hold multiple interpretations.

During my fieldwork (2007-2009), Sanjay Kak, a Delhi-based filmmaker whose films are well known at a national and international level, was the one who provided the clearest answer to me for those questions – and he even published

his argument in an essay titled 'Playing with Flux – Constructing an Argument in Documentary Films'. In this essay, Kak asks whether we can ever suggest "that a documentary film is a filmmaker's argument, a one-dimensional construction from the raw material of real life" (2000: 21), and he continues by pointing out:

> That [documentary film as a filmmaker's argument] could be so, were it not for the intervention of the *audience*. Audiences may see the film in the way it has been constructed for them, but they are also capable of taking apart the apparently seamless argument to read their own meanings from the images and sounds that they are provided. Audiences can liberate the arguments of a film from the details of their construction. They can help the arguments rise and float away to another sphere, or else, equally doggedly, tether them to the ground (Kak 2000: 21, *emphasis* in original).

Kak concludes that the triangulation between reality, filmmaker and audience "makes the documentary a much more *democratic* form of expression" (ibid, *emphasis* added) than understanding the film as a fixed-text.

Other documentary filmmakers in India present an argument similar to Kak's; yet, some of them, especially those coming from a feminist tradition, make a step ahead claiming that this contemporary, self-reflexive and performative approach *differs* from documentary practices which had existed before. In particular, these 'new' practices, some filmmakers argue, differ from state-documentaries, which, since Indian Independence, have borrowed their techniques from the classic 'anthropological' male gaze on others. Madhusree Dutta, a well-known Mumbai-based filmmaker and artist, is the one that makes this point clearer in her conversations about contemporary documentary film practices in India but also in her publications for academic (Dutta in Sarkar and Wolf 2012a) and non-academic (Dutta 2002, 2007) journals.

In a 2007 essay written for *Himal Southasian*, and in its longer version published online for *InfoChange*, Dutta describes films produced by the state-run documentary film institution, Films Division, as "a mix of the war film and the

anthropological film".[1] Because of their colonial gaze, these films provoked a reaction amongst independent filmmakers in India who, from the early 1990s onwards, had worked towards more performative forms of filmmaking.[2] In her words,

> The vast, top-angle shots of the land where human beings are part of one linear category, made so popular by war films, coupled with close shots and detailed depictions of the alien customs and people, an anthropological device, were held in consecutive shots. The wide, top-angle shots were to establish the authenticity of locales that are not part of the mainland. The closer shots were for anthropological curiosity, presenting a few chosen details of the "others" that exist outside normative practices -- the Mizos, the Kukis, the Kashmiris, the Banjaras -- and thereby outside the Benevolent State (Dutta 2007b, http://infochangeindia.org/film-forum/news-views/in-defence-of-political-documentary.html).

In this article, Dutta describes the whole range of Films Division's films as a mixture, "in style and aesthetics", of "war" and "anthropological" films (Dutta 2007b). On top of generalising a wide spectrum of state film productions, Dutta seems to make use of the category of 'anthropological' film in a way that differs from how it emerged in the discipline of anthropology and, above all, in a way that denigrates the discipline per se. Hence, the question that arises is: where does the 'anthropological' category come from?

Without going into any detail of the way contemporary filmmakers see their practice, understand their history and create film categories (see Battaglia 2012a), what I would like to stress here is something else and twofold. First of all, in their representation of 'others', documentary filmmakers in India have always tried to engage with both their film-subject and film-viewer – making use of different aesthetical, ethical and political techniques. Secondly, they have often

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[1] For *Himal Southasian* see
www.himalmag.com/2007/october_november/indian_documentary.html (last accessed 6/07/11).
For *InfoChange* see www.infochangeindia.org (last accessed 6/07/11).
See also Madhusree Dutta's website www.madhusreedutta.com/index.htm (last accessed 6/07/11).
[2] For a different reading of the relationship between contemporary forms of filmmaking and the history of colonial and postcolonial India, see Battaglia 2012a.

claimed to take distance from what they understand as 'anthropological representation'. The word 'anthropological', indeed, has been often use as another way to refer to the 'colonial' gaze – as if the discipline of anthropology had never evolved and anthropologists had never been critical and reflexive about the relationship with their 'other' and their practice of 'othering'.

While thinking to be innovative and 'different' from anthropologists, in their audio-visual representations, contemporary documentary filmmakers in India are expanding even further their audio-visual activities, directing their interest towards online digital image-making. Certainly, in the past few years, India has witnessed a boom in innovative digital experiments. From the internationally appreciated activities of the *Raqs Media Collective*, the digital annotation of *Pad.ma*, the open space for media(tion) of *Khetro* and the *Cinema City* multimedia project, digital practices are mushrooming across the subcontinent offering a critical analysis of representation and conventional documentary films (see Battaglia and Favero 2013). Furthermore, digital practices of image-making are today offering other exhibition platforms for those Indian filmmakers interested in ethnographic methods but not recognised in the field of documentary in India nor in the field of visual anthropology. Accordingly, I would argue, practices of image-making in India also overlap with new image-making practices emerging amongst a new generation of visual anthropologists, discussed above. The reason of this overlapping can be associated with the development of the transcultural production and consumption of contemporary digital techniques (see Battaglia and Favero 2013). However, I would speculate, this is also the result of two similar histories yet to be acknowledged by both Indian filmmakers and visual anthropologists. Recent encounters between these two fields support my statement.

Indian filmmakers and artists interested in 'digital image-making' and 'ethnographic films' have already begun a dialogue with the academia. Thus far, this has occurred through the medium of film festivals (e.g. Delhi International Ethnographic Film Festival 2008 and London Persistence/Resistance 2011), academic conferences (e.g. ASA 2012 in New Delhi, ECSAS 2012 in Lisbon and 'Exploring Modern South Asian History with Visual Research Methods: Theories

and Practices' in Cambridge 2013) and it has been identified as an academic lacuna in recent scholarly publications (see Battaglia 2012a, 2012b; Sarkar and Wolf 2012b). As part of my engagement with these discussions, I co-organised a panel discussion on digital practices of image-making in South Asia during ASA12, in New Delhi, and during the ECSAS12, in Lisbon. On these occasions, international anthropologists and film scholars together with artists and filmmakers from India initiated a fruitful, yet sometimes uneasy, dialogue. The difficulty of this dialogue was often due to being reciprocally oblivious to the enduring reflexive and performative relationships of, respectively, visual anthropologists and Indian documentary filmmakers with their film-subjects and film-viewers.

In short, what I am trying to point out in this section is the following. If visual anthropology is able to encompass other audio-visual practices existent outside the discipline and if contemporary filmmakers in India cease to be critical about anthropological representations, they will both offer new possibilities for collaborations and cross-fertilisation between academics and practitioners. Through these exchanges, I envisage that early-career visual anthropologists may stop looking outside the discipline to cultivate their multidisciplinary theoretico-methodological insights and their audio-visual multisensory practices. By doing this, they may be able to connect their practice with more concrete use of media forms through which newer generations of students in anthropology also seem to be increasingly connecting with the discipline. In other words, it is only after revisiting visual anthropological theory and practice that, I would argue, the field of visual anthropology will be better integrated within the broader discipline social anthropology.

Multidisciplinary Anthropology

Thus far in this paper I have sought to point out some of the similarities existing between early-career visual anthropologists and documentary image-makers in contemporary India. I have also highlighted some of the key moments in which these two sets of practitioners have already met, exchanged ideas and difficulties in creating a fruitful dialogue. In this linear narrative, however, some questions

remain unanswered and enduringly strike me. Why are we always trying to justify our practice as visual/media anthropologists? Do we really need to appeal to digital (and performative) technological developments of audio-visual forms to claim a better space amongst non-academic audio-visual practices and within the tradition of British cultural anthropology? Often I find myself resilient to accept a positive answer to this question.

Many visual anthropologists argue how anthropology has historically privileged a rationalist textual discourse rather than its visual component (see Taylor 1994; Banks and Morphy 1997; Wright 1998; Ruby 2000; Van Dienderen 2004; Grimshaw 2001; Griffiths 2002; Pinney 2011 amongst others). And to make this claim all of them return to a genealogy of visual anthropology that dates back to debates that emerged in the 1970s with what Sol Worth, Jay Ruby and Larry Gross, amongst others, called 'Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication' (see Gross 1981). Only a few anthropologists have so far pushed this argument even further and identified the genesis of (visual) anthropology in practices already existing in the early twentieth century (see Grimshaw 2001, Griffiths 2002, Pinney 2011). I would position myself amongst these debates – that is, in a sort of anthropology of the late XIX and early XX century, which perceived the discipline as the vessel of a much wider spectrum of practices that continuously informed each other. At that time (that is when anthropology acquired an institutional status and became a self-identified discipline and a profession, with a clear methodology, an object of study and a body of knowledge), the visual component played a very important element.

Here, I am not even referring to the work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson who, in the classic history of visual anthropology (and arguably even in the history of social anthropology), are considered as the first anthropologists who in the 1930s made use of the movie-camera as a tool of investigation. Rather, I am referring to the film attempts made by personalities such as Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940), Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929) and Franz Boas (1858-1942) in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In particular, I am here referring to the work of Franz Boas who, since the beginning, saw anthropology as a science to make claims together with other

disciplines – and in fact, he nurtured interest in film as much as food, linguistic, art, biology, history to mention a few.

In a brilliant historical ethnography of cinema and anthropology, *Wondrous Difference* (2002), Alison Griffiths, revisits historical moments of the turn-of-the-century in which anthropologists were thinking together with visual images, whether in relation to popular culture or museum representations (see also Grimshaw 2001, Pinney 2011). On top of providing fascinating details of the time in which the discipline was not yet self-defined and was rather experimenting with different forms of representations, Griffiths opens up possibilities to ground the contemporary debate about image-making practices (vs. ethnographic film tradition) and multi-disciplinary anthropology (vs. sub-fields within anthropology) in a sort of pre-history of anthropology. In other words, what I am suggesting here is that, a late nineteenth century analysis of 'ethnographic' film practices can function as an historical rupture useful to push the contemporary sub-field of visual anthropology further, make it central in social anthropology and open it to other non-anthropological practices such as for instance, the aforementioned encounters with documentary practitioners in India.

My sense of the genealogy of anthropology is that we began with an open spectrum of practices and interests within the discipline and we gradually moved away from this, becoming more and more specialised in sub-fields. In an almost cyclical way, I would suggest that it is as if at the moment we are returning to this multi-disciplinary starting point by referencing to other disciplines (or sub-fields) in our lectures, seminars, working papers or by collaborating more with policy makers, artists, activists, journalists etc. Nevertheless, it also seems that we are yet to start doing this in scholarly publications.

While the relationship between anthropology and public intervention have been raised in various meetings of what started to be named 'applied-anthropology', in the specific area of film, media and art (and therefore in my everyday ethnographic encounters with the academia), I discovered that anthropologists not directly interested in these fields of inquiry, are increasingly making use of non-anthropological forms of image-making to teach their non-media/film/art

related courses – including development, diaspora, gender, caste, tourism, kinship, religion, to mention a few.

To me, all this suggests a need for social anthropologists to take the audio-visual component of anthropology more seriously. To be more specific, what I am trying to highlight here is that in order to set up standards of evaluation for audio-visual forms of representation in social anthropology there is a need to combine this with a repositioning of visual anthropology within a wider whole and start including the audio-visual component as a fundamental subject for any curriculum in anthropology – starting directly from the bachelor level. There are several reasons that can support this move, some of which have been already highlighted in this paper.

To sum up, new generations of anthropologists are already expanding their horizons in their theory, methodology and practice, and in doing this they are increasingly in search for academic recognition. Despite its 'evolution' from within, visual anthropology continues to be considered by several practitioners outside the academia as an out-of-date approach to representation (c.f. the example of filmmakers Madhusree Dutta mentioned above). I would argue that because innovative approaches struggle to be recognised from within, they hardly can change the perception of the discipline outside the field. Nevertheless, academic-practitioners making use of more innovative forms of representation and practitioners outside the academia are beginning a productive dialogue of exchange and collaboration beyond the banner of 'visual anthropology' (see Battaglia 2012b).

On top of all this, I would finally add that similarly social anthropologists, not trained in visual practices, are increasingly showing interest in new audio-visual forms of representations (such as art installations, online interactive archiving, experimental documentaries etc.). Above all, students of anthropology are progressively approaching the discipline through the use of audio-visual forms about anthropology (much more than made by anthropologists) available on the internet. In my past four years teaching experience I have discovered that students also seek to create a continuous connection between the discipline and their contemporary media(ted) everyday way of learning and knowing.

Accordingly, they get increasingly interested in audio-visual forms of communications.

In short, making the audio-visual central in anthropology will not only re-connect with a genealogy of the discipline which seems so far to be left behind; but also it will better connect with new generations of students and early-career visual anthropologists as well as with art/film/media practices existent outside the discipline that, regrettably, continue to look down upon the anthropological investigation.

To conclude, I suggest that it is perhaps time to move away from reflections on 'observation' of facts in films, and rather emphasise the 'experiential' aspect of the image-making. What I mean with this is really to emphasis the process of making films (rather than its form and content), and see it in multiple and changeable exhibition contexts. For me, the question should shift from 'what an anthropological image does' to 'what filmmakers, artists and anthropologists do with people, images and audiences'. The outcome can be different (e.g. a television film vs. an academic text, or an abstract art work vs. a lecture) but the process can be very similar.

Hence, rather than keep accusing each other on what is the more valuable way of making 'ethnography', it is to me more useful to think in collaborative terms and see to what extent image-making practices can inform anthropological knowledge and writing and how anthropological writing and thinking can inform filmmaking practices and way of knowing.

When films started to enter museums in the early XX centuries they were accompanied by a lecturer (see Griffiths 2002). When films (and any other art practice) enter art galleries today, they are accompanied by written text. Today all these 'texts' converge together in digital platforms offering increasing possibilities to concurrently think anthropologically and artistically. By doing this, I would argue, contemporary ethnographic practices of image-making (produced within and outside the academia), offer possibilities to move away from the self-contained debates on representations within anthropology and other art practices. Moreover, they create opportunities for new graduates in the

discipline to better connect their anthropological knowledge with a general public and activities outside the academia.

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