

Between familiar and unfamiliar. Ethnographic films in the *Festival dei Popoli* (Florence – Italy)

Vittorio Iervese (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia / Festival dei Popoli)

To adopt a metaphor that is rather well known in the field of psychology and social sciences, every festival constructs a map of its own that defines the manner of orienting oneself in a territory referred to (Korzybski 1941). The success and more generally the sense of a festival's project lies precisely in the space between the territory and the map (Bateson 1972). In this sense, film festivals perform essential mediation between the various entities and fields precisely by supplying maps that make it possible to explore parts of the territory that may or may not be well known, and even help to construct parts of the territory. In this manner, festivals can be considered to be instruments of mediation and catalysing instruments within the film world, putting film directors and scholars (but also producers, audience, journalists, students, etc.) in contact and connection with each other (e.g. Iordanova and Torchin 2012). At least this is what happened to the Festival dei Popoli in the stage, which spans from 1959 to the present.

This paper aims to explore, with the tools and from the perspective of a researcher and member of a selection committee, the relationship between documentary films and ethnography through the long experience of Festival dei Popoli (FdP herein below), one of the first film festivals focused on ethnographic films. A Festival that has become a place of risk, where the expectations upon departure may be let down and where the map and the territory are drawn together.

1. Familiarizing the unfamiliar: the role of film festivals

Despite the common ground they share, deep disagreement emerges among filmmaker and researchers about the different documentary (and ethnographic) film-making methods. For example, Richard Leacock and Jean Rouch, two of the main pioneers of Direct Cinema and *Cinéma Vérité*, claimed both Robert Flaherty as a legitimising figure but they used different approaches and methods to reach the same objective: a cinema that establishes 'direct and authentic contact with lived reality':

"Rouch criticised Leacock for his lack of reflexivity [...]. Rouch said Leacock was in fact 'selling Coca Cola to the world' that is reproducing cultural stereotypes while pretending not to. [...] [On the other hand, Leacock] claimed that [...] Rouch was 'forcing meaning and interpretation', imposing preconceived ideas" [Van Cauwenberge 2013, 191].

Is in the profundity, intensity and accuracy of the relationship between cultural orientations, aims and methods of documentary film-making that we can identify the "ethnographicness" or, in other terms, the quality of an ethnographic film. But looking at this relationship means also affirming that every ethnography constitutes rather than represents reality, they are social constructions in which the observed reality is interpreted and storied, through different media (oral telling and written documents, but also photos and films).

Every ethnography, as well as ethnographic films, can be considered as the attempt to reintroduce the unfamiliar (the other) into the familiar (ethnographic categories or taxonomies). Traditionally, the symbolic function of using familiar terms to cope with the unfamiliar has been the province of religion (Luhmann 2000) but since the early modern times we assisted to a transformation of historical semantics and a consequent shift from "cosmology to technology". In other words, besides religion, symbols and scientific categories represent the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar within the familiar world. On the contrary, modern and contemporary art has the purpose to: "impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Shklovsky 1998, 16). And to accomplish that, art makes objects, persons, social relations, landscapes, etc. "unfamiliar". Art, in other words, has the power to make our process of seeing less habitual. This effect or property of art, to see things anew, was given a name in a 1917 essay by the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky. He called it "defamiliarization" (ibidem)¹. Familiarization and defamiliarization are

two different approaches to deal with otherness in scientific as well in artistic works. For example, according to Comolli: “the utopia of Direct Cinema [...] lies exactly in trying to «(re)familiarize» film, to bring it back to the simplicity of its beginnings, and to mix it back with daily life” (Comolli 2006, 139). All ethnographic films by their nature involve defamiliarization in that they bring about in the viewer a sympathetic understanding of the world of others, taking one outside one’s familiar world. But in some masterpieces, the depth and richness with which one enters the experiences of others can truly widen one’s sense of being. These are the films that the Festival dei Popoli has persistently and obstinately chased all his life.

Dividing over 56 years of the history of Festival dei Popoli into separate stages certainly may involve somewhat forced interpretations and there is a risk of simplifying something that is decidedly more complex (Tasselli 1982). However, the philological reconstruction of the events is not what matters here. It is here more important to draw from this rich experience to identify the interplay between familiarization and defamiliarization in all these years.

Florence, 1959. A group of humanities scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists and media specialists found a not-for-profit organization named: “Festival dei Popoli”. At the end of that same year, the scholars organize the first edition of a festival held on the 14th to the 20th of December, to which they give an odd and complicated subtitle: *An International Retrospective on Ethnographic and Sociological Film*. A glance at the composition of the jury for the first festival suffices to understand the presence of this heterogeneity and freedom from the start. Ernesto De Martino, Edgar Morin, Jean Rouch and Cesare Zavattini appear among the members of the first jury – a panel that in itself represents a compendium of the various possibilities for use of audiovisual means and a statement on interdisciplinarity (Festival dei Popoli 1959)².

The concept of “presence,” introduced by Ernesto De Martino (1948; 1977), perhaps provides the best summary of this founding stage of the FdP. De Martino speaks of “presence” as the ability to keep in one’s consciousness the memories and experiences needed to respond adequately to a given historical situation, actively participating in it through personal initiative and moving beyond it through action. Presence thus means being there (e.g. Heidegger’s “*Da-sein*”) as persons of sense, in a context of sense. There are moments, De Martino maintains, in which a profound “crisis of presence” appears. In such cases, rites help people manage this crisis of presence through encoded, collective behaviors. Stretching De Martino’s concept, a festival can be conceived of as a collective rite that deals with disorientation in the world, or in other words an opportunity to “familiarize the unfamiliar”.

From the beginning, the FdP positioned itself in the midst of a turning point in the history of film forms and not only those specific to documentaries. Technical experimentation and theoretical debates, linguistic innovations and new forms of authorship converged at this point. Therefore, from the beginning the debate about the ethnographic cinema inside the FdP was based upon the familiarization of the unfamiliar or, on the contrary, the unfamiliarization of the familiar (questioning the taken for granted assumptions as in the ethnomethodology tradition).

An intense debate broke out in the festival of 1962, between those who wanted to privilege the scientific documentary genre, focused on representation held to be objective and true-to-life, and those who preferred instead to focus more on the various forms of construction of reality (and of hybridization of genres). That same year a specific *Colloquio Internazionale sul film etnografico e sociologico* (International Conference on Ethnographic and Sociological Film, Florence, December 12-15, 1962) was organized, but it did not lead to any points of agreement.

In more general terms, until the 70s two perspectives coexisted, granting radically different roles to ethnographic film. Rather than investigating more urgent and pressing contemporary phenomena as some members would have preferred, the films presented in the early stages of the FdP tended to have a “conservative” approach, that is, they neglected the processes of hybridization and change in favour of objective recording of ethnic identity set in jeopardy by the phenomena of modernization and globalization. In academic terms, these cases are known as “salvage ethnography” (Clifford 1989) or “urgent anthropology”, indicating that an ethnic anthropological study should have a function that documents and protects cultural diversity. Secondly, for other members of FdP the term ‘ethnography’ referred to a method of research more than to a cultural exoticism of the subject matter. Thus, ethnography film-making is important because it places the researcher/film maker at the centre of the production of knowledge through images. Emblematic of this divergence inside

the FdP was the film awarded as best documentary in the first competition: *The Hunters* (1957) of John Marshall and Robert Gardner. This film on four !Kung men of a primitive hunting society was later accused (and the same happened with *Dead Birds* awarded with the "Marzocco d'oro" in 1963) of being not anthropologically researched enough, too altered by means of editing, staging, sound-syncing and in general: "colored by so many subtle fictional pretensions and artistic ornamentations that it has surrendered most of its usefulness as a socially scientific document" (Mischler 1985: 669). This critique suggested that researchers/film-makers working on familiar territory (socially scientific field) could elicit greater understanding because cultural, epistemic, aesthetic and linguistic barriers do not have to be negotiated with the public. On the contrary, interpretive research and creative documentaries aim to investigate the invisibility of everyday life, working in "a partial transparency that enables both filmmaker and spectator – through instruments – to perceive, express, and communicatively share the world" (Sobchack 1992: 194).

Another good example of the distinction between familiarity and unfamiliarity is *Silent Minority* (1981), a film by Nigel Evans awarded at the 22nd FdP. Considered too "harrowing" by some viewers, part polemic and part narrative by others, *Silent Minority* came just before the transitioning of the British mental health system from an asylum-based system to one of care in the community. British Health Minister Sir George Young attacked the film as not being a true representation of such hospitals and Nigel Evans, after the screening in Florence affirmed that the film wasn't a "true representation" because aimed at de-construct the reality or, in other words at activate a process of exploring the categories that tradition has imposed and the history behind them (Festival dei Popoli 1981). The goal of Evan's film was less to explain or illustrate than to guide the viewers to share an experience that has brought about more experiences. What counts here is "[...] to detach a secondary word from the embroiled primary words provided by the world, history, and one's existence." (Barthes 1966).

2. "Films should enact and embody an encounter"

The constant action of reflection accompanying the organization of the screenings and the competition was not only a result of the intention of the organizers of FdP, but also the festival's response to numerous perturbations coming from the outside. For example, in response to objections as to the coherence and quality of the films selected in previous years, a public meeting was organized in 1966 to discuss the films selected and not selected by the festival (CIFES 1966). Organized by the CIFES, the meeting was also an important moment of reflexivity, in which experts and non-experts participated with the intention of re-establishing in a shared vision the festival's selection priorities and criteria. The audience thus became an active participant, challenging the positions of the festival and influencing its decisions. The festival system responded to these requests by rethinking its practices and narratives. Above all, there was the decision to drop the 1968 competition with the intention of: 1) getting away from the competitive way of thinking implicit in all competitions and 2) motivating the production and dissemination of lesser known works and authors not within a type of cinema: "made hypertrophic by a greedy and cynical industry; in the late 1950s film became a burdensome, expensive, distant, and contrived machine" (Comolli 2006, 139). Before than a scientific or a cultural issue, ethnographic cinema became a political issue.

The political act was put before the cultural and scientific act, subordinating the elements of artistic and scientific quality in films. At the same time as the elimination of the competition in 1968, the establishment of a jury made up of the general public was accepted and though temporarily, this "people's choice" substituted the role of the jury and judgment of merit with heated discussions focused on the political role of the films presented. This was an agitated, but stimulating stage, in which the festival was giving testimony, publicly affirming its participation in the emerging debate of the times.

This narrative entailed further decisions, such as that of defying censorship and taking the risk of screening films held to be "questionable" or even films that had been banned. This was the case of a protest film against the war in *Vietnam, Le ciel – La terre* (The Threatening Sky) by Joris Ivens, filmed in 1966, but banned for a few years and shown during the 1968 FdP, resulting in the police arriving, their attempt to confiscate the copy that had arrived in Florence and the director being conducted to police headquarters. Similar events occurred in the case of films exposing the apartheid regime in South Africa, with the South African ambassador then filing an official complaint with the Italian government, considering the films defamatory to the government in Pretoria. Even important films in terms of their

aesthetic value and innovative cinematic language, such as *Marat/Sade* (1966) by Peter Brook or *Titicaut Follies* (1967) by Frederick Wiseman were only shown in Florence in the wake of public protests against censorship and against the pressure exerted by “the Establishment”.

Ethnographic films have often highlighted how some of the most seemingly mundane aspects of life become rooted in politics. On the other hand, the political ethnographic gaze calls into question many of the assumptions of traditional political studies, and that this can call for a significant re-theorization. This process left indelible marks on the identity of the FdP that have remained today. The framework of academic disciplines was being left behind in favour of an approach open to broader issues with a strong political engagement. Films selected and awarded by the FdP refers of a documentary consciousness charged with a sense of the world. The charge of the real comprehends both screen and viewer, restructuring their parallel worlds not only as coextensive but also as ethically implicated each in the other. “The charge of the real always is also, if to varying degree, an ethical charge: one that calls forth not only response but also responsibility (...) It engages our awareness not only of the existential consequences of representation but also our own ethical implication in representation. It remands us reflexively to ourselves as embodied, culturally knowledgeable, and socially invested viewers”. (Sobchack 2004: 284). From this perspective, ethnographic films promote social participation, social engagement and individual, deep involvement as well. Take the case of *The leader, the driver and the driver's wife* (Nick Broomfield, USA 1991), a film that won the Gian Paolo Paoli Award for the best ethnographic-anthropological documentary at the 32nd FdP. Made in 1991 during a pivotal moment in South African history, Nick Broomfield's critically-acclaimed film chronicles the collapse of the white supremacist AWB party in apartheid. For the majority of the film where Broomfield was unable to get an interview with the Leader himself and his attention was drawn to the driver and his wife, hence the title. Even though nothing goes according to the director's plan, this film gives spectators the opportunity to get into an absurd microcosm where racism is the only rule. A film in search of an ethnography, a dark and heavy cinematic experience in which spectators become active participants. This idea is clearly explained by J.P. Sniadecki and V. Paravel directors of *Foreign Parts*, a 80-minute documentary film produced with the support of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab and awarded at 53rd FdP: “For its courage of questioning the traditional approach of anthropological research” (extract of the motivation of the International Jury of the Festival dei Popoli 2012): “In short, our approach in *Foreign Parts* asks the viewer to be an active participant in the film's meaning rather than passive recipient of information. [...] To my mind, films should enact and embody an encounter rather than just report on one after the fact” (Alvarez 2012).

To promote active participation and to enact encounters is what the FdP tries to do in the last years not only selecting and screening documentary films. In the last years the FdP has adapted to what appears to be a common trend among contemporary international festivals, that is, the transition from being events to cultural institutes with a plurality of functions (Vallejo 2014). Today the festival receives approximately 2,000 new films per year from all parts of the world and it attempts to select works not only in a spirit of competition, but also so as to follow them on their path of achievement and development. The FdP has gone beyond the festival, that is, it has extended its gaze beyond the actual days of the competition and the presentation of films, planning activities that are carried out year-round. A market project has been started (*Doc at work – Industry*), the training project (*Doc at work – training*) has been strengthened, projects are underway dealing with distribution (with the series of Popoli.doc DVDs) and publications (with the journal *Quaderno del Cinemareale*), and new relationships have been developed with national and international entities. The FdP is now seeking to follow the entire “supply chain” of film production, from supporting a new idea to the distribution of a finished work. In between, there is an ongoing dialogue with the public and the experts, in an effort to activate a process that creates value and meaning. Therefore, it is no longer possible to see a festival only as a festive moment or a showcase for works created as “closed” products for use in the darkness of a movie theater.

Conclusion

“Form is when the substance rises to the surface” says Victor Hugo, a principle that is as suited to documentary film as it is to a festival that proposes and presents films of this type. To give shape or form to something is to separate it from the indistinct rest of it and thereby

make it communicable. Whoever wants to observe something must indicate and distinguish, hence be able to distinguish between distinction and indication (Luhmann 1995). Therefore, ethnographic filmmaking cannot transcend the domain of experience and theories and methodologies can be considered as models that help to order and manage that domain. Against this backdrop, it is possible to affirm that “documentary is less a *thing* than an *experience*” (Sobchack 1999: 241) so that potential existential connections made between events or people portrayed are dependent on our capacity to draw connections between different areas of lived and observed experience. Mostly films selected by FdP coincide with wandering, and getting to some place that you can only reach together: the film director and the character (and the viewer), swapping roles, often indistinguishably. From this perspective, the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity or between reality and make-believe becomes less interesting, although it has often engaged those who are involved with film (and images in general) as much as those engaged in social research. From this perspective, one can also think of the FdP as the ongoing attempt to bring a map into focus, taking care of the territory: discovering that substance and surface are indissolubly interconnected by a mutually dependent relationship.

Films cited in the articles

The hunters (1957) by John Marshall and Robert Gardner.
Dead Birds (1963) by Robert Gardner.
Vietnam, Le ciel – La terre (1966) by Joris Ivens.
Marat/Sade (1966) by Peter Brook.
Titicac Follies (1967) by Frederick Wiseman.
Silent Minority (1981) by Nigel Evans.
The leader, the driver and the driver's wife (1991) by Nick Broomfield.
Foreign Parts (2010) by V erena Paravel, J.P. Sniadecki.
Moi, un noir (1958) by Jean Rouch

Bibliography

Alvarez, Patricia. 2012. Interview with Verena Paravel and J.P. Sniadecki. *Fieldsights - Visual and New Media Review, Cultural Anthropology Online, December 17, 2012*, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/33-interview-with-verena-paravel-and-j-p-sniadecki>

Barthes, Roland. 1964. *Essais critiques*, Paris, Seuil. En. Tr. *Critical Essays* (1972), Northwestern University Press

Bateson, Gregory. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. University Of Chicago Press.

Clifford, James. 1989. The others: Beyond the 'salvage' paradigm. *Third Text* 3.6 (1989): 73-78. Taylor and Francis.

Comolli, Jean-Louis. 2006. *Vedere e potere. Il cinema, il documentario e l'innocenza perduta*. Roma: Donzelli

De Martino, Ernesto. 1948. *Il mondo magico. Prolegomeni a una storia del magismo*. Einaudi, Torino

De Martino, Ernesto. 1977. *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*. Edited by Clara Gallini. Einaudi, Torino

Festival dei Popoli. 1959. *Catalogo del I Festival dei Popoli*. Firenze, 14-20 Dicembre 1959.

Festival dei Popoli. 1981. *Catalogo del XXII Festival dei Popoli*. Firenze, 12-19 Dicembre 1981.

Festival dei Popoli. 2012.

Korzybski, Alfred. 1941. *Science and Sanity*. New York: Science Press.

Iordanova, Dina and Leshu Torchin (eds.). 2012. *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies.

Luhmann, Niklas. 2000. "Familiarity, Confidence, Trust: Problems and Alternatives". In *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, edited by Diego Gambetta, chapter 6, 94-107. Electronic edition, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford.

Mannay, Dawn. Making the familiar strange: can visual research methods render the familiar setting more perceptible? *Qualitative Research* February 2010 10: 91-111,

Mischler, Craig. "Narrativity and Metaphor in Ethnographic Film: A Critique of Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds*." *American Anthropologist* 87 (1985): 668-72.

- Morin, Edgar. *The cinema, or The Imaginary Man: An Essay in Sociological Anthropology*, (1956) trans. By Lorraine Mortimer University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Shklovskij, Viktor. 1998. *Art as Technique. Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Shukman, Henry. 2014. "The Unfamiliar Familiar". *Tricycle Magazine*.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 1999. Toward a phenomenology of non-fictional experience, in Michael Renov and Jane Gaines (ed.). *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 241–54
- Sobchack, Vivian. 1992. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tasselli, Maria Pia. 1982. *Il Cinema dell'uomo. Festival dei Popoli (1959-1981)*. Roma: Bulzoni.
- Vallejo, Aida. 2014. "Industry Sections. Documentary film festivals between production and distribution", in *Illuminace*, vol. 26, n.1
- Van Cauwenberge, Genevieve. 2013. "Cinéma Vérité: Vertov Revisited". In Brian Winston, ed. 189-198. *The Documentary Film Book*. British Film Institute/ Palgrave.

1

Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization can also be compared to Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* or to Bertold Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* ("alienation effect").

² At the time of the first edition of the FdP, Jean Rouch had just made *Me, A Black (Moi, un noir, 1958)*, an audacious hybridization of ethnographic documentary film with an improvised fictional plot outline and the creation of recognizable characters. A few years earlier, Edgar Morin had published his famous study *Le cinéma, ou l'homme imaginaire (The cinema, or The Imaginary Man: An Essay in Sociological Anthropology, 1956)*, in which he addresses the relationship between cinema, imagination, and consciousness with a precise "non-realistic" description of this connection. Cesare Zavattini was already an accomplished screenwriter, having written several masterpieces of Italian neorealism. However, he was also a tireless innovator who considered film as a flexible and popular form of art, which he would have liked to bend to the purposes of civil renewal of society, saving it from market pandering. Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965) was one of the most important Italian social anthropologist and religious studies scholar. During his field research in Southern Italy and on Sardinia he observed rituals of a *mondo antico* and *mondo magico* that can be traced back to shamanistic ideas persevering even in light of Ancient Greece's cultural legacy. De Martino recorded his field research using both phono- and photographic technology as well as film.