

Truth and Ethics in Visual Anthropology

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The following thoughts were inspired by films and discussions seen and heard at the Festival of Visual Anthropology in Pärnu, an annual event initiated by Mark Soosaar in 1987. I am also using my own years of experience in documenting folklore and ethnographic material, and of making video films as a point of dependence.

Problems concerning ethics play a significant role in any society but they emerge particularly in the case of cultures and peoples on the verge of extinction. In visual anthropology ethics appears on three different levels: the ethics of the film maker, the ethical principles of the people featured in the film, and the ethics of the TV or cinema audience. The latter may be relatively low (and in serious opposition of the subject matter filmed) and therefore it should be seriously considered what is to be filmed where and to whom it should be shown. The scientific documentation for archives, which is made public only for educational purposes or at academic events for a closed circle of scholars and specialists, is an entirely different aim than a film which is meant for a wider audience. In the case of the latter an especially sensitive sense of discretion is required. However, the academic approach may involve risks as well:

“The scholars of previous centuries had it so much better – they did not have to worry that someone might violently abuse the materials they had published. Today you can never be sure who might get hold of your work and what unpredictable consequences might follow.” Thus commented Galina Grachova, a famous Russian ethnographer who later perished in a helicopter accident in Siberia at one of the Pärnu festival discussions.

Obviously it all depends to a great extent on the general ethical standards within the society. It would be irresponsible to disseminate any information about sacred places in Siberia

where bands of criminals terrorize the local population by looting and perpetrating acts of arson even inside local villages. On the other hand, one of the festival programmes included a film showing a ritual ceremony of a tribe in China that attracts masses of tourists every year. That making of the film raises problems there too but the nature of these problems is quite different. The older generation wishes to preserve the religious function of the ceremony and wants to reject the alien audience. But the government provides financial subsidies in order to promote its development into a huge tourist attraction that would satisfy the younger generation. This situation has initiated an ethic conflict between the principles of the bearers of traditional culture and the market-oriented administrative policy, which in turn gives rise to opposition between different generations of culture bearers.

The ethics of traditional cultures and traditional concepts of ethics on the whole deserve much more research. Anthropologists are outsiders as a rule, even if they study their own culture, and this is all the more true about professional cameramen who usually have only a superficial knowledge of the people they are filming. Their contacts are not sufficient for them to understand the deep structure of traditional communities and cultures. The prerequisite of the latter is usually a close co-operation between cinematographers and anthropologists (folklorists, ethnologists), unless the film maker is him/herself a professionally trained ethnologist or folklorist, or the bearer of a culture.

The relationship between the film maker and the scholar, the art of cinematography and science involves actually a wide range of problems. To begin with, the aims are different – the scholar is foremost interested in making a direct documentation of authentic material, but the film director is interested in making an intriguing, artistic film to attract an audience. It depends largely on the director to what extent he/she departs from the general humanist mission of making a historical document of a traditional culture, or discusses social problems, presents a publicist message. Or whether the film foregrounds subjective visions and prejudices, departing from creative self-realization, or commercial interests. In this connection one cannot avoid the relationships between the creator of the film and the

financier or commissioner of the project. The French film maker Colette Piault also referred to this relationship in her interview at the Pärnu festival. Both in the east and in the west cinematographers must often take into account the requirements of television companies or other commissioners who are usually dictated by money. Ideology also plays a role.

An anthropological film should try to avoid unrealistic situations and staged scenes. An ideal anthropological film is a historical document. But sometimes one has to compromise, especially in case of receding traditions, when people still remember ancient customs, songs and dances but have ceased to apply them in primary authentic context. In this case it is important that the film displays a clear distinction between spontaneous performance and demonstrations in front of the camera. Colette Piault remarked at one of the Pärnu discussions that, "In an anthropological film everything must be honest. If a scene is a reconstruction, it should be clearly stated in the film. The audience should not be deceived."

For example, the credit titles of Hugo Zemp's film presenting Alpine herders list all the situations, which were authentic and which were reconstruction, and in which communities the shots were made, because the whole footage had been cut into one film for artistic and scientific purposes (depicting one day in the life of Alpine herders and the role of yodding in it). But the audience might not always be provided with the information that people were gathered from different locations in order to perform for the camera, or that they might even be bearers of different local traditions who in authentic situations could never perform the same rite jointly. Quite often the draft footage may be of greater scientific and historical significance, because the final editing of the film has to meet the requirements of screening, of formal unity, it has to meet certain time limits, etc.

The conflict between the scientific and "cinematographic" approach to the material become more profound in cases where a conscious "lie" is created – when ethnographic facts are violated, when singers and dancers are placed in artificial circumstances alien to the tradition, where they are forced to behave unnaturally; when the sequence shows things that would never appear concurrently, or when the soundtrack of a documentary presents music from a completely different culture (a charac-

teristic feature of Soviet ethnographic films); or when ethnographic details appear distorted.

For example, at one of Pärnu festivals a film was screened showing a Nganasan shaman who performed in a costume and attributes that had been specially made for the film and were heavily falsified. But in traditional culture details are especially important and expressive. Everything spiritual is expressed in things or in their signs or symbols, and vice versa – a sign carries the actual power of the depicted (an object or creature from the human or the divine world), and mediates its effect on the carrier. Therefore everything has to appear in its correct form. Distorted details reflect alien ethics.

Perhaps the ideological distortion of reality is even worse than deviation from scientific truth. In previous years Soviet films often fell into the imagined category “A Beautiful Lie”, which depicted an idealized picture of reality with the objective to demonstrate “the flourishing” of the peoples in the Soviet state. But after the recent opening of Siberia to western cinematographers encounters “beautiful lies” in their films as well.

At one of the festivals the film “Nganasans– A Siberian People” by the Swedish director H. Tiren was met with serious criticism. The film maker’s point of departure was quite ethical from a subjective perspective – a romantic image of a distant and exotic Siberia which he had longed to visit all his life. The artistic taste of the financing television companies had also played some role. But in addition to distorting traditional ethnographic details, such films give the audience a falsified picture of the small peoples of Siberia, and add to the illusion of the “beautiful lie” about the living conditions of the indigenous peoples in Russia in general.

An ethnological film should apply a specific cinematographic approach. It should try to avoid using explanatory narrative text, which is sometimes over-exploited in scientific films. Words sound more convincing if uttered by the performer, not the author of the film. And he should not dominate the interviews. The inside perspective, people’s views, evaluations and opinions, their manner of speaking, singing, dancing, playing of music, how they communicate, or behave in their traditional environment, or in the atmosphere that they’ve been forced into – all that is as important as the material culture, rituals and other

anthropological elements. Such features can only be recorded on film or video, because in written transcripts and drawings, on photos and even on tape recordings all those details are lost. But the documentation of such material presupposes a mutual close relationship, and good understanding of the people and their traditions.

When I was making a TV programme of the folklore and lifestyle on Kihnu Island, I was confronted with the fact that the prerequisites of TV go against anthropological films, especially where the final editing is concerned (during our field work I was able to convince the TV crew to record songs, dances, stories, rites in their entirety, showing all the performance details). But in the final editing they wanted to avoid “talking heads” or singing faces, and change scenes as often as possible, because in a “good” video one take can be shown for only three seconds! That might be true in the case of MTV music videos, although that is a matter of taste. Perhaps it really does reflect the hectic pace of life and the neurotic atmosphere of modern industrial society. But an anthropological film in such a style would end up being jumpy, unreal, and its rhythm would not reflect that of the actual filmed community.

Films whose aim is to present a the result of some research and to illustrate it are quite different in principle. There the pictures and images are foremost illustrations, the main stress is on the author’s narrative text.

Without a doubt we need various kinds of films – instructive films; authentic depiction of songs, dances, playing techniques of musical instruments, technologies for making the instruments; depiction of concrete results of research projects; publicist messages; documentation of lifestyles, circumstances and people. Scientific films need not be dry and dull, judging by *The Song of Harmonics*¹ by Hugo Zemp that was awarded the Grand Prix at one of Pärnu film festivals.

In the case of religious rituals one cannot avoid the question of how far can the camera be allowed to go in filming a sacred rite, or how deeply can one disturb a culture with cinemato-

¹) See more about the film in Hugo Zemp, *Filming Voice Technique: The Making of “The Song of Harmonics”*. *The World of Music. Journal of the International Institute for Comparative Music Studies and Documentation* (Berlin). Vol. XXXI. No. 3 – 1989: 56–85.

graphic means. The director of *A Visit to Evuk-ik*, A. Mikhailov from Tomsk claimed that he filmed in a Khant family ceremonial site only what he was permitted to. Indeed, it was clearly stated in the film that it was forbidden to shoot the following, because the results may prove dangerous for the performer of the ritual. This is definitely an ethical border which cannot be crossed. When he was asked how it was possible for him to take a camera to such a sacred rite, the author replied that the Khants were his friends. Earlier A. Mikhailov had actually been working together with ethnologists, and he took advantage of the mutual trust between the scholars and the local population. But here again the problem crops up of where and to whom the film is shown. One should be very careful about that. Knowing the problematic ethical standards of the audience on the one hand, and traditional ethic norms on the other, it is quite understandable why one Mari healer put a curse on the film makers who had shown their film (despite being asked not to) on the all-Soviet TV.

Sometimes quite unexpected situations can occur. For example, a few times actual weddings were filmed for recording the wedding traditions of the Kihnu and the footage was edited into documentaries, those marriages did not turn out happy. And now the islanders are convinced that weddings should not be filmed because that makes them unhappy! Therefore I have used wedding footage since then only in fragments for instructive or research purposes, not as material for a feature film.

However, the documentation of a ritual act is not always detrimental to the inside rules of a traditional culture. I recall an incident from a field trip in Southern Estonia where a local healer was pleased to share her knowledge with me and allowed me to record her cure methods. But she forbid me to use those methods myself or pass them on before her death, because otherwise she would lose her powers. Still, the traditional practices demand that the healer (*tark*, *teadja*, *nõid*) has to pass on the skills, otherwise he or she would not be able to die, i.e. death would be difficult. If it happens that the healer cannot pass on his or her skills in the family or to friends, a folklorist may be a welcomed target, provided that the folklorist is worthy of the trust and acts according to the ethical norm.

The preserving of disappearing cultures is an ethical act foremost from the perspective of historical memory and general cultural history. If a traditional culture is documented on tape, video or film, it may assist in prolonging or restoring a culture when it is still living in a phase of assimilation. On the other hand, such recordings might also provide to be helpful in applying the elements of traditional culture in a new cultural context – either in a so-called secondary tradition or in a new creation, which is a common practice in modern Estonian culture. And it is not unusual for traditional communities to renew their song repertoire from folklore archives. Films featuring traditional rituals with relative songs and dances in a traditional context may provide an enormous help here.

In various countries there are many examples of excellent collaboration between film makers and tradition bearers while the wishes and requirements of the traditional community are the primary consideration of the film crew. And the community featured is obviously entitled to a copy of the film takes. I have tried to follow that principle in my own work in documenting the lifestyle and culture on Kihnu Island and in the Setumaa district (Kihnu and Setu are two small communities in the marginal regions of Estonia where the elements of traditional culture are still consistent).

I have also asked for feedback and evaluations about my films, particularly after they have been shown on Estonian TV programmes. The series *Kihnlased* (The inhabitants of Kihnu) included 11 shorter or longer programmes: *Suvi 1991* (Summer 1991), *Suvi 1994* (Summer 1994), *Käsitöömeister Roosi Karjam* (The craftswoman Roosi Karjam), *Kihnu naise hommik* (The morning of a Kihnu woman), *Meeste mured* (Men's concerns), *Naiste tööd* (Women's chores), *Kaevandu Anni leivategu* (Baking bread with Kaevandu Anni), *Kaevandu Anni lugu* (Kaevandu Anni's story), *Järsumäe Virve ja tema laulud* (Jäsumäe Virve and her songs), *Marina Rooslaid*, *Matused Kihnus* (A Kihnu funeral), *Ristsed* (Baptizing). The author of the latter is Anu Vissel who assisted me in recording material for all other films. It is interesting that for the target people the most important criteria of evaluation have been truthfulness and ethnographic details, in addition they have mentioned categories like 'interesting' and 'informative'.

Scenes from the film “Funeral in Kihnu” by Ingrid Rütel



Lowering the coffin into the grave.



Performer of the funeral ceremonies (the priest's helper) Marina Roosleid (in the middle) with singers at the graveyard.



Life goes on. A young relative of the deceased swinging in the farmyard.



On the other hand, the public expression of truth has its ethical limits. Mark Soosaar found himself in a serious conflict with Kihnu people because of his documentary *Kihnu mees* (Kihnu man). From an objective perspective the author had a truly ethical goal – to demonstrate the moral decay (alcoholism) of a traditional community, caused by the deprivation of self-determination under economic and political oppression. But the ways and means chosen to attain the goal were not acceptable to the community featured in the film. The film depicted actual people who themselves, or whose children or grandchildren, did not want to be marked for ever, they did not want to serve the purpose of a negative example, regardless of the positive aims of the author of the film.

I am fully aware of that rather closed community's sensitivity towards the invasion of their privacy, therefore I have often been hesitant as to what to depict. In case of people's private life I have never crossed the border set by the people themselves. In the community's social life, however, I have taken the liberty of discussing problems which the interviewed were not that eager to publicize. But I regarded it as necessary in order to shed some light on them and inform the wider public about them, especially when in my opinion it was eventually important for the future of the given community and their culture (e.g. the redistribution of land, and other problems concerning the social and economic changes after the restoration of Estonian independence). Obviously "candid camera" is completely out of the question in an anthropological film.

Another delicate aspect concerns the financial and moral profit gained on both sides ("earns himself honour and big buck at hour expense", was the comment by the local people about one film maker). The most general practice is to offer financial remuneration to the featured people. In some cases it is even inevitable. A few years ago a Setu wedding was celebrated with old customs and ritual songs, and with a special aim to be documented on film. The occasion lasted for three days – it was a real wedding, not a show – and it turned out such a grand event that without the financial support from the Estonian Cultural Endowment neither the local people nor the authors of the film could have afforded it.

But money brings along new risks. On the one hand – when being paid, people are ready to perform whatever show they are asked for. They would be willing to go even further. In a disintegrating society where people have lost faith in the future, they would be ready to sell their last remaining material and spiritual assets. Cinematographers from the former Soviet Union narrated a shocking example at one of the Pärnu festival discussions. In one Siberian village they could not find anyone sober, everybody, children included, were intoxicated. One man noticed that the crew was interested in old burial sites, and on the second day he attempted to sell them ritual dolls stolen from the graves, for booze. But according to traditional beliefs that doll carries the soul of a departed ancestor...

One cannot measure everything in money, of course. The moral feedback of a good documentary may weigh a lot more than any material reward. A film may present burning social issues to the wider public, it may serve as a means of political resistance for a nation or ethnic community struggling for self-preservation, it may promote and protect disappearing cultures and peoples, it may elevate the self-esteem of bearers of a culture, it may enhance a national, ethnic or local identity. An anthropological film may sometimes simply appraise man and humanity, or demonstrate the richness, versatility and attractiveness of the world, where so many different people and nations live with their customs, beliefs and traditions. It may simply promote their right to live their lives in a particular way. To communicate that ideal to the audience is one of the most important ethical missions of anthropological cinematography.

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