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ASPECTS OF CREATION AND PRESENTATION OF ETHNOLOGICAL FILMS

Abstract: Through a presentation of personal experiences and acquired knowledge during the production and presentation of ethnological films, the importance of the visual medium is emphasized, concerning the preservation and presentation of ethnological values. Data are based mainly upon research experiences related to ethnological films in the period 1992-2010.

Key words: ethnological films, visual medium, visual research, subjects, participants, recipients.

It is nothing new if we say that in a time when visual media plays a crucial role in life itself, even in its creation, visual ethnology has an important place in preservation, presentation and popularization of ethnological cultural heritage. The current importance of visual media (film and photography) is undisputable, as a mean of expression in presenting ethnographic material. This topic was covered on numerous occasions in the media, during presentation of ethnological movies, photographic exhibitions and other events. Simultaneously with the development of the latest production of ethnographic movies during the last two decades, a number of articles in relation to the historical development, production and other aspects of ethnological film in Macedonia were published. There were articles on the utilization of photography in the context of ethnological research, but still there is a lack of a more serious theoretical approach towards this visual medium and towards its importance.

On this occasion we would like to present the knowledge gained by ethnologists - authors of films, when it comes to production and presentation of visual materials, i.e. what kind of relations are created between the participant informants and the authors of the films, and how the public perceives the ethnological films.

The creation of an ethnological film undergoes few basic phases: preparation and selection of topic, its research (theoretical and at the field), approaching the subject/subjects that participate in the event or the ones at the field, shooting the movie, and selection and editing of the material. Although it is an independent part of the creation, the presentation, i.e. watching and perception - the acceptance of the movie by the audience, is probably the most important segment of the production of visual ethnological work. The effect of the presented upon the ones who perceive it is the most important part for

valorization of the achieved result. Although the target public is important when it comes to the presentation of the work (is it an expert public, visual anthropologists and ethnologists, other authors of movies or general public), through the craft of combining the topic and the details presented through film language, one can enable recognition and understanding of the topic even when it comes to general public.

When it comes to perception, i.e. the understanding of the topic or the subject of the film by the viewer, there are a number of experienced and well-known visual anthropologists who express their opinion on this topic. The phenomenon of the so called triangle refers to the relation between the sender, i.e. the subject of the research, the translator, that is, the ethnologist who deals with the visual medium (visual research and creation) and the receiver, that is the recipient. The understanding of the film is in fact complex and interactive, and it includes the knowledge and the level of education of all involved subjects (MacDougall 1998: 422; Storaas 2009: 12).

When it comes to the first part of the triangle, the subject of the film (a custom, a craft, a group or an individual), in order to obtain quality material it is important to achieve a whole and an objective expression by the participant/informant. It is also very important how it is going to be transferred, how relaxed and spontaneous during sharing of information the informant will be. In most cases, the participant/informer speaks to the camera and formulates his statement based on how he imagines his audience, to whom he refers it to, that is, how he would like himself to be seen.

All authors have, more or less, faced this phenomenon. Thus, in most cases one attains a more authentic statement during a spontaneous conversation with the participant/informant during those moments when the camera is not on, or when he is not aware that he is filmed. Also, one often notes a change in the way of expression during recording, as well as a change in language utilization. Often the informant when being in front of the camera uses different words and more complex sentences, or he changes his way of speaking, which gives him a feeling of an official statement, whereas some participants, members of the older generation in Macedonia, often use Serbian language in their statements (either through using Serbisms, or stating complete thoughts and sentences in Serbian). We have faced such examples when dealing with informants - craftsman (coppersmiths from Bitola), as well as with some ethnic communities (Bektashi Turks from the village of Kanatlarci). A similar example is the experience with the informants in Istanbul. Although in the unofficial conversation they talked with an emphasized Aegean dialect of the Macedonian language, in front of the camera they talked in Bulgarian, since this was the language that they've learnt in primary school, and they use it for official speech.

Creating the feeling of accuracy while presenting, which is obtained through an acquired spontaneity of the expressions and of the event, is mainly

realized through building an appropriate relation between the participant/informant and the camera. In most cases the longer and closer contact with the informant results with a greater spontaneity of the statement. The praxis also shows that if the participants are less pressed by the visual medium, one attains more spontaneous and thus more authentic statements. Such example was the making of the movie “Adak” with the Juruk Turks in the village of Kodzalija in 2003, with Merguzel, the mother of the girl who was the main actor in the movie. As the main informant and as good host, wanting to clarify the event, Merguzel tried to explain all important elements, and since she was not burdened by the phenomenon of the public medium, she was more spontaneous. In fact she continuously spoke to the researcher (in this case to me), not to the camera. We met such spontaneous informants during data gathering for the project on traditional food in Turkey and Macedonia, but due to different reasons - after we explained the informants that the camera tapes only for museum documentation, not for a public medium. Surely, there are different examples as well. When informants are under a heavy influence of public media, above all television, the statements are influenced by that fact. In the case of the Juruks, after years from the first recording, the influence of TV could be felt. In only few years the influence of TV on their answers could be felt, i.e. the influence of the Turkish programs provided through satellite antennas. Also, depending on the topic, influences could be felt even in body language and terminology that were copied from TV. These examples were obvious during data gathering on food preparation, which is directly influenced by the numerous shows dedicated to food preparation on TV channels. One of the main participants, Philip, otherwise an excellent informant, extremely free and spontaneous in front of camera, could not help himself speaking in plural to the public, which is directly copied from a number of travel and tourist TV shows.

When it comes to dealing with a certain more complex, social or religious topic of a certain community or environment, when the participants themselves are personally involved, then the statement is often dedicated to a concrete audience. This is especially emphasized in environments where there is a certain conflict or another problem, and the statement refers to a clearly designated group or an individual. Storaas calls this type of statements “statements for the public outside the yard”. As an example he points to his experience during filming in a village in South-East China, on the complex relation of a number of families in one yard, where the actor speaks to the public outside the yard (Storaas 2009: 13). This type of answers are expressing a hope for solving the issue from the outside, by someone else. But at the same time it is a need for explanation and self-justification. In the context of the statements dedicated to the public outside the yard, I would mention two of my personal experiences. One refers to the filming of the movie “Bektashi” in the village of Kanatlarci, during 2005. Among the

members of this dervish community there is a conflict and a division into two fractions. The statements of the leaders and other members from both sides were formulated so that the others could hear them, the ones from the “neighboring yard”, or someone outside. The statements aimed at emphasizing one's own truth, above the one of the other side, or making an appeal towards different authorities so that they provide assistance, or help the group obtain a favorable judgment. Another similar example happened during filming in 2009, in Makedonski Brod, and it refers to the movie “Friends”. The adolescents from the local gymnasium said one thing in front of the camera, and other things when it was off. Most of the children-Christians spoke about the ideology of cohabitation with others, understanding and tolerance towards their Muslim fellow pupils. Still, at other times, mainly when the camera was not on, there was intolerance and discrimination, even offence towards them. Without realistic argumentation, those were mainly statements with recognizable feelings of prejudice, as well as fear of not knowing the other. It was, on the other hand, very difficult to establish a contact with the Muslim children, and they were much distanced when giving statements. The girls from the village of Plasnica completely rejected to be filmed. One of the arguments was that their statements could be misused on YouTube.

When it comes to the second part of the above mentioned triangle, the translator, i.e. the ethnologist who is a mediator between the participants and the public, one should emphasize his or her essential role in the registering and transmission of the key elements for the topic. To do this one needs to acknowledge and choose good informants/participants. The author – ethnologist is continuously faced with making decisions on what should he film on the field, and what to select afterwards. To do this properly one has to know the topic, and also to have a certain “craftsman’s” knowledge of the visual medium – the film. The relation with the informants is ver important, but it is also necessary to maintain a certain distance between the participants and the topic and the author’s approach of the ethnologist. The experience during the shooting of the film “Adak” in the village Kodzalija showed that there the cooperation with the already mentioned woman Merguzel was essential, since her knowledge was directed towards self-initiated responsibility and intuitively, to inform us and to lead us through all key moments of the three-day event. Using the observational method, aiming only to follow but not to intervene in the event, we did not have a permission to film at all times, especially when it came to the women participants in the event. The cooperation with our host was very much useful in obtaining key information on the event, in those extremely difficult working conditions, with a mass presence of the members of the extremely closed community. Contrary to the relation with this participant, who expressed immediate wish to cooperate and help our work, our experience with the Bektashi was

different. In this relatively closed community, not in an ethnical but in a religious sense, where there was an additional problem of division of the community, we needed much longer time to obtain the trust of the participants, who revealed the needed and important information gradually and partially.

However, one should take into account that these two cases relate to different events. In the first case it is a matter of a film description – narration, i.e. utilization of the observational method of filming of a custom when one does not need many informants. In the second case, we wanted to present a certain situation of division, dogmatic dispute in the frames of a religious community, we needed more informants from both sides. All this shows that the ethnologist, if he or she is acquainted with the situation beforehand, can follow the situation better, and even direct the questions in order to clarify the topic. In such a case the probability that certain complex situation would be clearly presented in front of the public is greater.

When it comes to the third part of the triangle, the receiver, this is the point where one can check or acknowledge if the author succeeded in passing the barrier and bring closer the cultural difference between the two sides, the participant and the recipient (MacDougall 1998: 187).

Still, one should above all take into account the category of recipients, i.e. the type of the public. It could consist of experts, anthropologists, students, other connoisseurs of ethnological movies, as well as general public. But the public could consist of the participants themselves, individuals or groups. The participants themselves in most cases have different expectations of what they see on the screen, and experience has shown us that they are mainly not satisfied by the way they are presented. Some of the say that verbally and openly, while others show that in a hidden way and are being confused. We got such reactions during filming of some of the movies (“The sound of the hammer”, “Adak”, “Bektashi”, “Piece to all”). However, these are not unusual experiences, and many colleagues have had them as well.

There is a method in visual ethnology where the participants/informants have a chance to make their own version of how they see themselves, or how they expect to be seen by others. This, in fact, is one of the last practices in creation of anthropological films. Asen Balikchi, the classic of visual anthropology, few years ago practiced the method of filming by the participants/informants where they film themselves, i.e. where individuals from the local communities are being trained to film their own environment and the direct events. This is one of the methods that are considered as new and more authentic in contemporary visual ethnology. The example of F. Storaas is different but still somehow close, he allowed in his movie on the Palestinian in Israel to his participants to have the last word. This is how the dissatisfaction of the participants can be avoided. On the other hand, experience has showed that the time distance in the presentation of the ethnological film can have a

different effect. We had such an experience during 2009 where the protagonists who saw the movie “When we went to Stambol”, which was filmed with them in 1994. The time distance, i.e. the nostalgia for that time, initiated emotions, but also enthusiasm for the re-filming.

When it comes to other recipients, for which we suppose that they have an expert knowledge, we would agree with Wilton Martinez. In 1992 Martinez conducted research with students at a beginners anthropological course in California, when he noticed that they were either uninterested or totally wrong in interpreting the anthropological movies that he presented to them (Eco 1979). Our experience with presenting ethnological movies to students of anthropology was no different. With few exceptions, there is no serious interest for these films by this type of public. We can suppose what is the reason for this situation, but more on this on some other occasion.

When it comes to recipients of ethnological movies at festivals and other similar events in other countries, then it is a different situation. At most of these screenings that is an obvious interest, and a surprising understanding by the recipients, even knowledge of different fields and problems. This information is not surprising since the public present at these events, festival and special projections is better acquainted with the topic in comparison to certain ethnologists who rarely or incidentally watch ethnological movies. In any case, watching ethnological movies, besides being training, presupposes certain scientific data from the field of socio-cultural anthropology and ethnology in general, as well as professional knowledge of the visual medium.

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