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Intangible Heritage: Chance and Challenge for Visual Anthropology

In "Picturing Culture" Visual Anthropologist Jay Ruby summarizes what he thinks lies at the heart of an anthropological cinema: "If ethnographic filmmakers were to produce films that tell the story of their field research, and the story of the people they studied, in a reflexive manner that permitted audiences to enjoy the cinematic illusion of verisimilitude without causing them to think they were seeing reality, then an anthropological cinema would be born" (Ruby 2000: 278). At the same time he takes a strong stand against "professional filmmaking" when he says that: "The need to make something the film world calls a good film with commercial potential and that qualifies for the increasingly common market-based festivals should be abhorrent to scholars." In this paper I discuss that it is time to build new bridges between Visual Anthropology and what Ruby calls „professional filmmaking".

This applies especially when it comes to the medial adaptation of intangible heritage. I argue that the anthropological quest for a filmic text is somewhat different here and sketch a new path for this undertaking. Culture "as such" does not exist! Intangible heritage can only become part of cultural memory via representations. Representation of culture is a main subject of Visual Anthropology. The UNESCO intangible heritage convention presents several chances for anthropological research and its audiovisual representation. Two questions are of particular interest: firstly, what's the epistemological basis for an anthropological attempt to adapt intangible heritage? Secondly, how would a discussion about the audiovisual adaptation of intangible heritage need to differ from questions and findings of Visual Anthropology. Cultural memory is shaped by conventions. While written texts work better syntactically, filmic texts rely more on their semantic capacities that build up on cultural conventions. Hence, conventions of how stories are told can not be overlooked. Visual Anthropology, however, struggles with these conventions. Films by Visual Anthropologists are often burdened with self-reflexivity and a sceptical attitude towards semantic capacities. This is an obstacle if they aim to have an impact on cultural memory. I argue that, according to Marshall McLuhans finding "the medium is the message", new nonlinear media forms such as DVD and the internet, ask for a new concepts of anthropologically motivated media. Instead of trying to implement all key elements of Visual Anthropology in one single filmic text I say that many of the findings of Visual Anthropology could be tested and implemented by producing audiovisual adaptations of intangible heritage in a different form. Key ideas are multivocality and multisitedness, empowerement and experiment, cooperation and co-production.
Multivocality and multisitedness: The main goal of an "Intangible Heritage Media Institute" is to produce intangible heritage media not as a single "master narrative" but as a "lieux de memoire". Instead of limiting the capacitiy of a single audiovisual text by overloading it syntactically, it will put more emphasis on its semantic quality. At the same time, however, the concept reveals how limited the point of view of one single author is. Hence, two or more authors from different cultural backgrounds will be invited to work on the medial adaptation of a single intangible heritage tradition. They will compete about e.g. the most original and innovative narrative / the most outstanding point of view / the most sensitive insight on the

cultural phenomenon. This way, a multiovocal and multisided approach will be established. Self reflexion lies here much more within the concept of multivocality and is less the burden of one single author.

Empowerment and experiment: Another task will be the empowerment of media professionals, -artists & visual anthropologists from countries where media infrastrucure is not readily available. Professional does not mean that emphasis is placed on "production value". Rather, experimental explorations of narrative forms will be a key concept of the institutes work.

Cooperation and co-production: The Intangible Heritage Media Institute will be operated by anthropologists, visual anthropologists and media professionals. Its main goal will be to collect, produce and distribute audiovisual adaptations of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage over internet, DVD and television. Ongoing research will be carried out as to how these adaptation processes can be achieved within the theoretical framework of both Anthropology and Visual Anthropology