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Jay Ruby (Center for Visual Communication, USA): „Towards an anthropological cinema“

Still in the ghetto.

A comment to Jay Ruby's paper, „Towards an anthropological cinema“

I. Introduction

I do know parts of Jay Ruby's work and use some of his texts in my teaching. He deserves a lot of praise for what he has done over the years. Not only did he have the guts to stand up for a point of view time and time again, he also dares modifying it. Also, he attempts to test practically what he comes up with in theory. While most scholars, even in the field of Visual Anthropology, confine themselves to writing, Ruby does both, writing and producing audiovisual material. That is brave enough in an academic world where, more often than not and despite all theoretical knowledge about the mediality of culture, audiovisual production is still not considered academic. This is why Ruby's initiative is outstanding and reminds me of part two of Nietzsche's "Untimely Reflections" where he states, that the one who wants to act, needs to be able to forget in order to be able to act at all. In other words – Ruby is oscillating between him being a "Cultural Anthropologist" and what I would call a "Cultural Producer". While producing, Ruby necessarily needed to forget a lot about what he certainly knows about narrative.

II. Ruby's intention: to get out of the "ethnographic film ghetto"

The little I know about narrative indicates that a "successful" narrative, one that reaches a wider audience instead of a special interest "ghetto", is both the result of certain needs of both human nature (yes, I'm a bit of a structuralist here, clinging on to a dramatological theory of culture...) and cultural nurture at a particular point in time. It's banal: in different times and cultures, somewhat different ways of storytelling seem to be in favor. One has to keep that in mind if one wants to get out of a special interest ghetto and reach "the masses". Now, in comparison with many other (nonfictional) narrative forms, I guess that a contemporary audience will find Ruby's Oak Park attempt too longish, too amateurish in terms of production value and as a result of these and other reasons probably too boring to watch. Does that say something about the ingenuity of some of the ideas applied, for instance the concept of non-linearity? Not necessarily. There is a discourse going on about the Oak Park right now and I guess it will, within the boundaries of the discipline, go on for a while. It will be

interesting to see, however, if both the project and the discussion about it will have some impact outside of what Ruby calls the “ethnographic film ghetto”. So far, he does not seem to have a lot of success. Taking into account how much Ruby knows about narrative I am pretty sure, however, that he also knew that with “Oak Park” it was not going to happen. I don’t even think he really wanted it, because otherwise he would probably not be so critical with the work of those he calls “professional filmmakers” but, rather, look for some support from that side as well in order to get where he wants to go.

III. Narrative

At some point of his article Ruby asks: “Who will wade through all this material”. I think this is where another part of my criticism comes in. I must admit that I question the role that Ruby bestows to the author of an audiovisual text.

For one I guess that any author’s attempt to “hide” behind his data is an epistemological mistake, especially if it comes to audiovisual material. Franz Boas once pointed out: „Your data must of course be separate from your interpretation, but you must have the guts to interpret.“ That might be o.k. for a book, but with audiovisuals it simply does not work. Footage can not be put on display in full length without boring most people to death. This again, I would argue, has to do with the “nature” of storytelling on the one hand and with cultural conventions on the other. Since these conventions DO constitute culture, however, they should not be overlooked just because they are conventions. While Dr. Ruby does actually not put his material on display in full length, it still is relatively boring. Of course he selects what he shows to us and what he doesn't. So he is without doubts the author. But why is he the ONLY author in a project of that nature? Would the non-linear Oak Park project not have been a perfect example to show how limited the point of view of one single author, in this case a retired male Anthropologist, in fact is? Why are there not several authors who compete, with different esthetic concepts, about e.g. the most innovative narrative / the most outstanding point of view / the most sensitive insight on Oak Park and its protagonists? Also: if we talk about nonlinearity we should not forget that we live in a world full of what Nicolaus Cusanus has called *coincidentia oppositorum*. All these contradictions surrounding us can most probably not be depicted by one single author, no matter how much footage he or she puts on display or how self reflexive he or she is. I miss this multivocality.

Consequently, I would like to add a few general remarks to what lies at the heart of Ruby’s picturing culture theory: reflexivity. Both, the role of any author in selecting, shaping and thickening his data and his role in reflecting them and the process of getting them within the audiovisual text are almost contradictory and extremely hard to master.

I would argue, that the reflexivity that Ruby every so often demands from anthropological cinema was very important at a time when questions around the concept of reflexivity have probably had the most important impact on the discipline of anthropology as a whole (and far beyond). At that time cinema vérité (going back to Dziga Vertov, of course) has, for good reasons, reshaped not only the form of ethnographic or nonfictional filmmaking but of filmmaking as such. While it is true, that “pure” cinema vérité approaches are rare, elements

of it are commonly used by both anthropologists and "professional filmmakers" since more than three decades now. I would argue that reflexivity still is important, of course, and as anthropologists we should be proudly aware of this basic concept. It was arguably the last really relevant anthropological contribution to cultural production anyway. At the same time, however, the quests for anthropological audiovisual texts have changed and if we really want to get out of the "ethnographic film ghetto" I think that overstretching reflexive elements in a filmic text is rather dangerous for its capacity to work as such. While written texts work better syntactically, filmic texts rely much more on their semantic capacities. Again, Ruby's central claim is very, very hard to come by with and I must say that Oak Park proves it: "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).

As a filmmaker I am not mainly concerned about the epistemological questions pertaining to my role as an author and I do admit that I am generally more busy, or at least busy enough, with storytelling as such (mostly applying a Grierson type narrative form). The little I know about mediating culture indicates that it is always the irrealization of reality, the construction of a story, that then again forms reality. There are no stories in real life but life can only be depicted in the form of a story. As a consequence I dare to tell stories, rather than pretending that revealing something beyond the story through making the filmic process visible is more "honest" or more "real" or more "effective". Again: I do NOT think at all that reflexivity is irrelevant. I DO think, however, that as cultural producers we pretty much limit our capacities of expression by overstretching it or seeing it as the most relevant goal of our undertakings.

IV. Ethnographicness

Let's forget for a moment all the attempts to find new labels (such as Ruby's Anthropological Cinema) for the old trade of representing (exotic) culture. In "Rethinking Visual Anthropology" Marcus Banks asks a central question: what constitutes the "ethnographicness" of a filmic text? Banks comes up with what I think is a pretty good answer: it's the intention of those who engage in it that makes the difference. It's the discourse, it's an ongoing process. If anthropologists on this list take on a perspective that is different from Jay Ruby's (certainly a very important elder, so to speak) that's fine. It's necessary and he will somehow have to cope with it.

While I do not see THE new paradigm on the horizon, however, it seems that my generation (I am 35 years old) is not that much concerned anymore about reflexivity issues. We rather did grow up with it and somehow, probably, needed or still need to free ourselves from a lot of constraints that reflexivity means for our attempts to find a place as Visual Anthropologists not only in a (terribly limited) academic context but also, and probably more importantly, outside of this context. Here, I do agree and disagree with Ruby at the same time. I think we should leave the ghetto, but we should NOT be afraid of what Ruby calls "professional filmmaking". Rather, I would argue, we need to team up much more with professional filmmakers to become, on the basis of anthropological concepts (reflexivity being but one of them), more relevant again in the much broader discourse of nonfictional filmmaking as a

whole. That is my plea as a professional anthropologist and a professional filmmaker.

I recently attended a two weeks summer school “ritual & media” in Heidelberg that was organized by Christiane Brosius and her colleagues at the South Asian Institute and the SFB 619. It was very interesting to observe that some of the elder scholars came up with intricate theoretical concepts and really unprofessional (not in quotation marks!) audiovisual material that, more often than not, did not work very well in communicating their theory. The younger scholars and students did not buy into that. They were simply not satisfied with the esthetic and semantic quality of what they saw. They found it mostly boring and unpleasant to watch and applied very different categories to judge the presented media than the producers themselves. (Sarah Pink was one of the exceptions. To my great surprise, she showed a rather poetic, highly estheticised, beautifully filmed and edited, Grierson type documentary on bull fighting.)

I think we can no longer overlook this (generational?) gap. As a matter of fact (due to cultural conventions, of course): every anthropologist who attempts to produce audiovisual material that is supposed to have some sort of impact outside of what Ruby calls “ethnographic film ghettos”, obviously needs to comply to certain production standards these days. Being both an anthropologist and a “professional filmmaker” myself (author, cameraman & cutter) I feel actually more and more offended if scholars pretend that even the most basic filmic qualities (again – it’s cultural conventions, o.k., but by overlooking the diegesis of filmic texts one simply does not solve the issue!) are something that can or should be overlooked or should even be despised. This is a general remark, however and not a statement on Ruby's work.

To come to a conclusion: If a one man show can produce audiovisuals well enough, in a time where all of us are used to an incredible amount of professional “production value”, fine. Poorly executed audiovisuals, on the other hand, that are accompanied by statements of the sort "this is NOT professional and aims at something different" will not help any anthropological attempts to come up with something innovative. This way we will NOT free ourselves from the “domination of professional filmmakers”. Instead, I would argue, we should do our homework better: know more about the history & theory of nonfictional media, know more about narrative, know more about the (arbitrary, yes, but not meaningless of course) contemporary conventions in regards to the technical qualities required, know more about the viewers expectations that form the diegesis of an audiovisual text. All these things are equally important for the impact that audiovisual texts will eventually have. If we keep on excusing ourselves for not being “professional” than we will remain marginal both in the academic world and in the world of “professional” media production. And this is exactly, If I understand it correctly, what Dr. Ruby regrets and tries to change.

What we really need to do is to work twice as hard in order to come up with new and innovative intellectual, esthetic, and sensitive (in whatever order!) concepts that combine the best of both worlds. It is only then, I would argue, that we will be able to leave the ghetto, find bigger audiences for what we produce and have a stronger impact on society.

V. Society and Audience

Audiences are not just there. They are formed by diverse forces within society. If we, especially as Visual Anthropologists, refuse to take part in the nurture element of the cultural process, that is, if we refuse to accept, or are not capable to use the possibilities that, for instance, television offers in terms of making our anthropological insights publicly available, then we simply overlook a huge chance in constituting cultural memory. Cultural memory does not automatically come into being. It is shaped by the (social, political, economical etc.) will of people in institutions. Television is such an institution. Most media scholars I know would agree that television still is a much more widely used and a more powerful medium than the world wide web. (The amount of serious media that is solely produced for the web is very, very low. A brief look at YouTube proves it!) On one hand Ruby argues that we should not talk ourselves in these “ethnographic film ghettos” and that he has come to realize that “conceptually ethnographic film has remained essentially where it was thirty years ago”. On the other hand, Ruby’s basing of television and professional filmmaking does not lead us out of this ghetto. At the most it opens yet another sub-ghetto, so to speak.

I really do value Dr. Ruby’s attempt a lot. It’s a brave, “bold” (as he himself puts it) and terribly labor intensive undertaking. I do NOT think, however, that it succeeds where he wants it to succeed. It will most likely remain in what Ruby calls the “ethnographic ghetto”. I have tried to indicate at least some reasons for my opinion.

I am leaving for a holiday on Sunday and will not be able to react to potential replies until the end of the month.

Best,

Thorolf