



ANA SAYFA

DERGİ

YAZILAR

SÖYLEŞİLER

ABONELİK

DAĞITIM

İLETİŞİM

ENGLISH

Prologue. Towards Experimental Ethnographies

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by **Montse Romaní and Virginia Villaplana /**

"A film cannot resolve the social and political issues it raises. Instead it records to what extent those questions remain unresolved, their difficulty, misunderstanding, conflict, lack of a solution and sometimes their impossibility."

Alejandra Riera, Maquetas-sin-cualidad, 2004.

"The works I have been producing can be viewed in general as different attempts to deal creatively with cultural difference (the differences both between cultures and within a culture). They seek to enhance our understanding of the heterogeneous societies in which we live, while inviting the viewer to reflect on the conventional relation between supplier and consumer in media production and spectatorship."

Trinh T. Minh-ha, Identity and Representation, 1996.

The film and video programme Prologue. Towards experimental ethnographies which we present in this year's Barcelona International Women's Film Festival, has its origin in meditations on geopolitical aesthetics, gender and globalisation which different audio-visual narrators have been producing in localised social and cultural contexts since the Eighties. Following on from the line of argument established in last year's programme, this year the cycle continues its interest in recent documentary accounts that continue to look at the politicisation of gender narratives and the construction of subjectivities. Filmmakers Berke Bas, Hito Steyerl, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Tracey Moffat, Sally Gutierrez, Caecilia Tripp and Lisl Ponger identify the new global conditions in which representations on class, race and gender are shown, through the creation of visual documents.

Prologue. Towards experimental ethnographies is part of a wider research project we are carrying out on the subject of documentary practices, from different locations and perspectives, with regard to a series of gender narratives that question the actual forms of representation and diffusion with which they work. Our interest lies in exploring and extending the idea of experimental ethnography proposed by Catherine Russell(1) based on the visual document. This narrative and research strategy extends through an itinerary of devices and activities that will take place over the coming months.

The programme of films in the festival is complemented, on the one hand, by a workshop run by the visual artist Sally Gutiérrez. Taking her own documentaries as a starting point, the filmmaker will focus the workshop on ways of inhabiting the urban environment, and on the various resistance strategies its inhabitants employ – particularly women – in between the gaps left by multiple global systems that are never completely controlled. On the other hand, and as its title indicates, this year the programme of films has been designed to act as a prologue to the exhibition Working Documents, which will take place at the La Virreina-Centre de la Imatge

Son Eklenerler

37/38. Sayı çıktı

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Arşivler

Ekim 2015 (1)
 Temmuz 2015 (1)
 Haziran 2015 (4)
 Nisan 2015 (11)
 Aralık 2014 (1)
 Mart 2014 (1)
 Ekim 2013 (1)
 Nisan 2013 (1)
 Aralık 2012 (1)
 Temmuz 2012 (1)
 Mart 2012 (1)
 Kasım 2011 (1)
 Haziran 2011 (1)
 Şubat 2011 (1)
 Kasım 2010 (1)
 Haziran 2010 (1)
 Ocak 2010 (1)
 Ekim 2009 (3)
 Mart 2009 (2)
 Ekim 2008 (2)
 Haziran 2008 (1)
 Mayıs 2008 (1)
 Mart 2008 (2)
 Kasım 2007 (3)
 Nisan 2007 (3)
 Kasım 2006 (3)
 Mart 2006 (4)
 Aralık 2005 (5)
 Temmuz 2005 (3)
 Mart 2005 (2)
 Kasım 2004 (2)

in Barcelona . It also establishes a direct link with the projection-debate coordinated by the artist Sandra Schäfer on the 13th June at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona on gender and representation policies in Afghan cinema.

Temmuz 2004 (2)
Nisan 2004 (2)
Ocak 2004 (2)
Ekim 2003 (2)
Temmuz 2003 (7)
Nisan 2003 (1)
Aralık 2002 (23)
Aralık 2001 (11)
Aralık 2000 (57)

The case study that gave rise to Working Documents as an itinerary of the visual document is found in the material filmed by Maya Deren between 1947 and 1954 on life and ritual in Tahiti, which led to part of the film "Divine Horsemen: the living gods of Haiti". Deren starts to develop her theory of film in articles like "Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film" and "Cinema as an Art Form" (1946). In these, she emphasises the need to develop cinema as an art of context, endowing it with process, in contrast to the forms of spectacle and consumer culture, both elitist and popular, which are currently embodied by the Hollywood narrative, and which today are perpetuated in the focus of narrative as a process of narrative statement, conflict and resolution.

Maya Deren's specific process-based ethnographic writing enables us to create a trans-historic link with a new type of documentary-making which emerges in the Eighties, and which brings with it the need to create visual documents that go beyond the different classical formats in which a narrative is transformed into a documentary. This urgent perspective of an immediate reality represents a paradigmatic change in ethnographic cinema, and imposes itself over the supposedly neutral notion of direct cinema and the direct account of an event, as shown in the "cinéma vérité" of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in "Chronique d'un été" (1961). In contrast, the feminist ethnography we present here offers a perspective on the idea of "experimental ethnographies" in which antagonistic bio-political practices of the visual document would be located.

The deconstruction, image of appropriation, staging and post-production of the narrative are clear symptoms of the post-capital era in which the image-document becomes the reading of social contexts. The documentary methods and examples we are screening act as spaces for mediation between the setting prior to the document's creation and its launch into circulation, questioning the social context in which the images are read and interpreted. As a result the focus of interest of these films moves from the representation of the documentary narrative to the question of how the narratives inscribe themselves in the social and physical context, and how in turn they place themselves at the service of the subjectivities they inhabit.

The first part of Prologue. Towards experimental ethnographies includes a pioneering work in terms of the thought of the Eighties, which explores the cartography mapped out by "women in the developing world": the film Reassemblage by the filmmaker of Vietnamese origin Trin T. Minha-ha integrates the post-colonial vision from a position that is critical of the cultural subject. Thus the shooting of the documentary itself becomes a reflection on the traditional ethnographical discourse in terms of who speaks, who films and how the subject situated on the other side of the camera is represented. In the film from Turkey "In Transit" (2005) and the film from the Philippines "Nazareno Negro" (2007), Berke Bas and Sally Gutiérrez reflect, from different contemporary situations, on the documentary perspective established by Trin T. Minha-ha, which is defined by the "outside in - inside out" nature of her position, enabling us to cross and enter into dialogue with the environment and its witnesses by bringing together multiple locations that locate us before a reflexive visual ethnography.

The second part features a variety of narratives constructed between fiction and the visual document, which break the established order of the symbolic to question the issue of cultural translation and to demolish the hegemonic vision of the oral and written tradition. Thus we recover the idea that Hito Steyerl raised in her text The Politics of Truth - Documentarism in the Art Field (2) , which is that in its function of structuring and acting upon the social arena the documentary adopts bio-political functions. So action through symbolic products can essentially develop in the field of culture, and it is there that mechanisms of diffusion will have to be built which will enable a new form of seeing and contributing to the uncovering of deception by the media hegemony.

The selected narratives of gender establish an interplay of scenic representations which combine the strategy of the archive, the autobiographical narrative and the dissemination of

images in the film “Lovely Andrea” by Hito Steyerl (2007). The symbolic translation of the cultural imagination in cinema, photography, dance, theatre, music and literature can clearly be seen critically in the film “Imago Mundi” by Lisl Ponger (2007). The resources of the theatrical set that the film-maker Tracey Moffat uses in *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) deconstructs ethnographic films through the use of subtitles, and avoids the cliché of so-called realist reconstructions. This system of trans-cultural exchange is centred on the idea of the translation of local and global imaginations, as the film-palimpsest *My Curaçao* (2005) by Caecilia Tripp argues.

Seen overall, this selection of gender narratives represents the mediation, cultural agency and documentation of activist positions in the form of essays on the global representations that are today narrated to us.

(1) Russell, Catherine: *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1999.

(2) Steyerl, Hito: “The Politics of Truth –Documentarism in the Art Field”, in Vít Havránek, Sabine Schaschl-Cooper, Bettina Steinbrügge (eds.): *The Need to Document* . Zurich: IRP Ringier, 2005.

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[article](#) [issue 16](#)

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