

Прегледни рад

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ГЕМ 75/1 (2011), 193–201*Nena Toth***VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY:
BRIDGING ART AND SCIENCE**

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“Everybody who cares for his art seeks the essence of his own technique.”

Dziga Vertov

Documentary film in Visual Anthropology serves as the most adequate audio-visual tool for capturing and archiving of culture and ethnographic content. Visual anthropology as a subfield of cultural anthropology is a powerful discipline which can best be explained as a synergy between art and science. The scientist and the artist play a collaborative role such that participation of both is required in order for projects to successfully materialize.

While vast academic literature focusing on the role of the scientist and the scientific method in visual anthropology exists, there is an emerging need for further examination of the filmmaker as the contributor to the discipline. This article's aim is to highlight the role of the filmmaker, stressing the importance of his or her artistic vision. The focus will be on the documentary filmmaking in particular, as this is the most suitable genre for visual anthropology.

From Visual Arts to Cinema Image Contemplation

The substance of the picture is its *idea*. The basic idea expressed by the language of pictures is a creative act. The picture as a product of an idea has its own unique language. It is universal. The language of a picture is readable for everyone. The stylistic unity of a work of art with a certain concept includes the unity of: *idea, elaboration* and *technique*.

CINEMA EYE: *Raison D'Etre* for the Visual Anthropology

In the field of visual anthropology an image can become a valuable artefact once its creators combine their expertise (anthropologists and filmmakers). Both of these experts, within their own fields of anthropology and filmmaking, strive towards achieving the truth which is, therefore, both factographic and artistic. Every situation in a film requires a certain visual approach which explains its content. The conflicting and interwoven sequences require conflicting and interwoven visual approaches of the cameraperson, and the unity of such conflicts represents a style. The creation of visual unity and style of the film is also a creative function of the cameraperson and that unity is achieved in close cooperation with director and the dramaturge. Therefore, beside the knowledge in the fields of visual technique and art, a cameraperson must have the feelings for the dramatic.

The work which takes place in ourselves influences the choice of the elements of the content (such as ethnographic or cultural subjects) and the stimulation and conditioning of creative and knowledgeable, as well as the refusal and rejection of the things already seen, things that do not belong to the individual. To solve something that had been already seen means to imitate, to copy. There could, also, of course, be a wish for self-accomplishment. But it is much more difficult, and admirable, to make something which will be imitated by others. If we constantly try to make something *new* and original, something "selfish", there is a danger to stay away from the *basic idea* of the work and every experiment has to have a purpose and has to bear out its end goal. We can allow ourselves some misunderstandings, but misunderstandings of a man, of a creator, not apprentice's mistakes.

For example an object or figure in a frame, as element of a film picture, must be presented to the spectator in a certain way. The spectator must understand those objects not only as elements which fill the picture. He must understand them primarily as an internal sense understands the reason why such an object or figures were selected for the picture. Or, more correctly, the spectator does not necessarily need to understand the real reason for the existence of an object in

the picture, but to accept it as the result of the entire work. A spectator with the professional knowledge can, of course, recognize and accept the purpose behind the work of its creator.

Mediating Cameraperson as an Image Creator

A Cinema Image as Cinema Artefact

The position of a man with the camera is a thoughtful cinematic observation unlike that of a naked eye. A cameraperson has to be more than a person with a camera. He or she has to be able to translate their thoughts or messages onto moving images. Robert Flaherty, who is considered by many to be the father of documentary film in North America, had created a seminal piece in 1922 known as “Nanook of the North” – “*A story of life and love in the actual arctic.*” The silent documentary told a story of life and survival in Canada’s Arctic, but in doing so it did more than just convey the harsh living conditions of the region. Flaherty juxtaposed the hardships of the north with the close family ties and love shared by the subjects in his film. Capturing these different aspects of life in the Arctic demonstrated the importance of thoughtful cinematic observation needed for such an endeavour.

This film is also important because it introduced elements most commonly associated with fiction filmmaking. Flaherty directed his subjects much like a fiction film director would direct his or her actors, thus creating an “illusion” of the truth. By telling them (family members) precisely what to do or how to behave on camera, Flaherty broke the rule of cinema verite (direct cinema) filmmaking style as it is known today.

The power of the camera person as a creator has to be considered.

“Nanook of the North” is nevertheless a pioneering masterpiece in documentary filmmaking, as it was the first of its kind and is highly regarded as an influential piece of work in documentary filmmaking. Flaherty’s methods of incorporating feature film elements instead of hurting the film’s validity had in a way contributed to it by supporting its artistic truth, which, ultimately despite challenging classical notions of having dispassionate observers on set (dictated by “scientific truth”) contributed to the overall endeavour. Ultimately the documentary was able to convey more than just facts about the life in the Arctic. It had painted a picture unlike any other before that time about the relationships and the challenges the inhabitants of the region faced which was done in a manner that was true to both the intent of the filmmaker as well as still satisfying key factographic elements. The author had effectively behaved both as a scientist and a filmmaker despite having had more affinity towards the latter profession.

The equilibrium between the scientific factography and the artistic endeavour can be, therefore, achieved even when the balance is tipped towards one end more than the other so long as the overall “truth” is preserved. The synergy of the scientific and the artistic elements is thus much more than just the sum of its parts as the overall end product cannot be quantified in terms of how much of either is present. It is only the final product that can speak of the truth. Flaherty’s work is a testament of this.



Spear Fishing with Nanook

Documentary Film: A Genre with Many Facets

The debate over what documentary film should look like continues today and can best be exemplified by the different types of documentaries which exist and are appropriate for different purposes in the field of visual anthropology.

There are indeed many kinds of documentary films an anthropologist has at his or her disposal. Some of these include the traditional Documentary, Personal documentary, Cinema Verite (or Direct Cinema), Kino Pravda (Cinema

Truth), Docu-Drama, Documentary experimental, or Documentary Short Fantasy movie.

Traditional documentary is perhaps what can be seen as the most common “classical style” as it is formatted and structured with interviews, voice over, and precise editing which follows a certain story or event. Certain documentary scenes may even be staged and it often includes a commentary voice over which follows the scene. Black and white photography is often used for this type of documentary, though colour is sometimes preferred. Another characteristic of the traditional documentary is that it is stylistically rich—filmed from various camera angles and with a variety of different lenses. Camera is often stationed on a tripod and the composition is precise. The editing process also ensures that time and space is clear to the audience.

The traditional documentary style is, in this sense, very different from the **Cinema Verite** style which originated from France in the 1960s. The filmmaker here is limited to using only the natural lighting from the filming locations, and the style is characterized by taking long shots with authentic (unedited) dialogs, with lots of handheld camera work and the composition which follows the events sequentially.

Explicit Belief: KINO PRAVDA

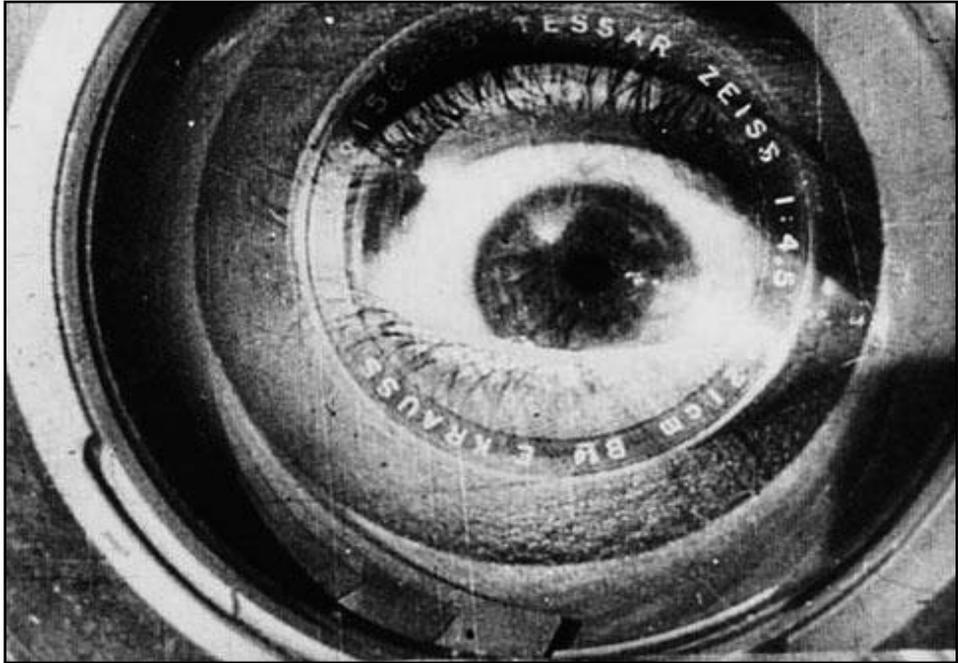
For Dziga Vertov there is a naked eye, there is a camera (lens) eye, and an eye of a of a man with camera. The question is which eye is appropriate? Is it a camera eye (lens): 50mm, 120mm, 10mm or 5,7mm), or Cameraperson’s eye, or is it the eye of a researcher / Anthropologist / Ethnologist?

A spectator must think in the determined way. If that is not achieved, then the spectator could stray away from the entire work. Therefore, the position of a figure in the interior of a film picture is not without importance / turning its back, near the wall, or cut by the edge of the format of the picture. A figure must be positioned in harmony composition with the general content, for the general content determines the real significance and importance of a figure.

It would be too simplified if we tried only to record a figure in a given plane. However, we know that such a figure is limited by the format of the film picture and that it represents a certain mark of the idea of the entire cinematographic work.

Kino Pravda, created by Dziga Vertov, while sharing the same literal title as Cinema Verite (film truth) is actually quite different stylistically from Cinema Verite. This approach, Kino Pravda from Dziga Vertov, which was prominent in the 1920s and 1930s, was rather complex and made use of technically original (and sometimes challenging) new cinema interpunctions such as freeze frame,

jump cuts, double exposure, slow motion, split screen, tracking shots, footage played backwards, and Dutch angles.



Man with a Movie Camera

Dziga Vertov developed an aesthetic approach which can best be explained as an implicit truth. His work demonstrates that an ‘illusion’ is the key factor in artistic imagination even though his films are created stylistically as a “cinema truth documentary films”.

Implicit Belief: An ‘Illusion’ as the Key Factor in Artistic Imagination

PHANTASMAGORIA

A Film by NENA TOTH

1st Prize: The Best Experimental Film, 2003

<http://www.niagaraindiefilmfest.org/winners2003.htm>

Documentary Experimental Film: A Short Fantasy

*Phantasmagoria*¹ was inspired by the work of Canadian filmmaker and Oscar-winner Norman McLaren. His work is served as an artistic model and initial inspiration for developing this project during the actual process of documentary film experimentation.



PHANTASMAGORIA. Short Documentary Fantasy Film. A World Where Anything and Everything is Possible

My 11:45 minute short documentary *Phantasmagoria* is based on true events. It is an experimental look at a historic event. Using a silent film genre, the audience experiences fantastic imagery with no dialogue.

Anna Edson Taylor, was the first person to go down the Niagara falls in a barrel on her birthday, October 4, 1901, from US side to Canada. She was trapped in the barrel for over 75 minutes. After emerging from the barrel she said: "Nobody ought to ever do that again".

The film was cinematically styled to appear reminiscent of archive material from 1901 (the lead original character was replaced with an actress). Technically speaking I chose to shoot the scenes which were meant to look like archive in black and white. I also used high contrast film negative (40 ASA) and shot the film with my Bolex 16 mm camera. Furthermore I used special effects by experimenting with the physical movement of the film inside the camera. This resulting

¹Broadcast on CBC Television, Canadian Reflections, Ottawa, 2003; World Premiere presented by Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa, June 07, 2003; Saw Video selected film as a presentation for the Canada Council of Arts, 2004; International 51st. Belgrade Documentary and Short Film Festival, Serbia, 2004; International TV Film Festival Bar, Montenegro, 2004; EUROPRESS International Documentary Film Festival, Subotica, Serbia; ARTLINK, Canadian selection of Short Film Fest in Belgrade, 2008; Contemporary Canadian Short Film Festival, Podgorica, Montenegro, 2009/2010.

effect was the vertical movement of film frames, which gave the audience the feel for the physical experience that Anna had felt during her fall.

In addition to giving the audience the feel for what happened to Anna in the barrel my intention was also to show how the events unfolded, or more precisely what happened in Anna's mind while she was trapped in the barrel. The cinematographic and editing techniques to explore this were inspired by free association of ideas and images. Footage Anna's thoughts and feelings were in colour. Close to the end of the short fantasy documentary movie the audience finally had received visually the original photo document of Anna Edson Taylor



*Anna Edson Taylor after she got out of the barrel
(Archive original photo from the year 1901)*

The collaborative efforts between scientists and artists, even when hampered by disagreements, have an important role to play in the further development of visual anthropology. While the hard sciences are always looking for the *truth* that is absolute in every sense of the word, visual anthropologists have to consider whether they as scientists and artists can accept the *Absolute cinematic illusion of the truth*, which has become more predominant as the *Raison D'Etire* in visual anthropology. This topic is of contentious nature and will continue to generate important debates within the scientific community which will also contribute to the evolution of the field of visual anthropology.

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Further links

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