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*Who's the author? Whose vision?*

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- 1 This article seeks to explore questions concerning participation, collaboration, voices, visions and multi-modal representations in the image-making process. It is a retrospective self-reflection on two audio-visual projects, 'Nila Illam' (Battaglia 2006a) and 'The Electric Oriental Journey' (Battaglia 2009), conducted by myself in India respectively in 2006 and 2009.
- 2 In particular, in this piece I turn my attention to the implication of the making of audio-visual projects and how different ways of constructing narratives create new forms of representations. In line with the theme of the AnthroVision special issue, I present two film-projects that in different ways seek to integrate invisible voices and make them co-exist with my own temporality and agenda, as both an anthropologist and image-maker. My contribution to this discussion, however, is not limited to the relationship between

the maker and the subject but extends the discussion to the viewer too. The cornerstone of my analysis will be rethinking of image-making as a triangular rather than dual process between actors (that is, a process involving maker-subject-viewer) and conceptualising the image-maker as the mediator of such process.

- 3 The goal of this article is to reflect on the possibilities and impossibilities of the triangular process of image-making when placed in relation to 'participation' and 'collaboration'. While self-reflecting on two of my film projects, I will argue that participatory and collaborative films are sometimes impossible to be realised in their theoretical and methodological intent, if they are simultaneously understood, on the one hand in relation to such triangular process of image-making, but on the other within the conventional milieu of documentary and ethnographic film practices (which is based on dual dynamics between actors). In contrast, following contemporary debates about multi-modal and interactive documentary art practices (cf. Galloway et al 2007; Blassnigg 2005; Lapenta 2011; Favero 2013, 2014; Hudson 2008; Nash 2012) I shall argue that these 'film modes' may not only exist as films but also allow visual/media anthropologists to concurrently explore their relationship with the film-subject (and/or informant) and film-viewer (and/or reader). This piece also contributes to debates concerning 'participation' and 'collaboration' (cf. Ginsburg 1995; Elder 1995; Crafton 2004; Battaglia 2012a), suggesting that the two practices are not necessarily synonymous with one another. Rather, 'participation' and 'collaboration' are here understood as a sort of 'craft' of filmmaking – that is, borrowing from Glenn Adamson (2007), as something always in motion, as a "moving target" (2007: 75) or, as I would say, as a series of positions taken in relation to the process of representation.
- 4 Before starting with the ethnographic description of the making of the films though, let me explain that the way I present the two audio-visual projects in this article is deliberately unbalanced. In other words, I have decided to provide thicker descriptions of the Nila Illam production process, as this was the first of the two and as such it marked the beginning of my self-reflexive exploration. The Electric Oriental Journey built on the experience of Nila Illam led me to more specific questions regarding audiences and collaboration. Hence, when I present this second project I do not get into any details and questions regarding the production of the film and move directly to discussions regarding its post-production. This unbalanced presentation is in line with the argument of this article – which is not concerned with comparing the two films as such, but rather focused on broader questions relating to the practice or the process of making participatory and collaborative films.

## Nila Illam: a participatory video with street children in Tamil Nadu

- 5 The Nila Illam project took place over a twelve-week period of fieldwork (mid-June to mid-September) in 2006, while I was volunteering with a local non-governmental organisation (henceforth NGO) called Volontariat in Pondicherry (today Puducherry), Tamil Nadu. At that time, I approached Volontariat thanks to a UK organisation interested in promoting volunteering work with Indian NGOs, which gave young volunteers the opportunity to also develop independent individual projects on their work-experience in India. At Volontariat, I was assigned, amongst other things, to work with street children, unknown<sup>1</sup> and gypsy children living together in a place known as

'Nila Illam' (in Tamil, 'House of the Moon' – the project took the name of the community). This was situated in a farm called Tuttipakam at 20km away from Pondicherry. There, I was in charge of looking after 34 mixed-age children with another foreign girl and along with some local women and an older man. The children were placed together in the farm under the guidance of adults. The NGO tried to provide them with a family they did not have. Hence, any new person interacting with them often became a new family member. For instance, although my role was that of an educator as well as of an activity leader, I often also became an elder sister, a young aunty or a mother depending on the relationship developed with each child.

- 6 Although each form of activity undertaken in the farm was under the control of the NGO, this community of children was sufficiently independent from the NGO. They were rather under the 'directorship' of Ravi, a young man in his late 20s, who regularly visited them. Ravi acted as a mediator between the farm and the NGO headquarter in Pondicherry. For the children, Ravi was simply their uncle and in a sense was their 'hero'. From the perspective of the NGO's director, Ravi was the most trustful person in the organisation who could coordinate the taking care of these children. For me, Ravi was an informant, a friend and a language translator. He was the only one who could speak English in the farm and therefore helped me with any form of verbal communication, as I was not sufficiently fluent in Tamil. Given this friendly and unsupervised atmosphere, it was relatively easy for me to set up a participatory video project with Nila Illam children. Ravi helped me with logistics and language, but at the very end of the project asked me to remove a couple of sequences that might have disappointed the NGO's director. This was for me a fair compromise that did not interfere much with my project. In order to explain this, I shall provide more details of this project and analyse my positionality in relation to this community.

## Production

- 7 Despite its original intent, the project turned to be a process of reflection on authorship. It was meant to be a participatory video in which all the decisions had to be taken collectively; but since the beginning this target faced difficulties. Even though I wanted to follow children's choices, in the process, I had increasingly realised that this was not always possible. I was a much stronger figure in the decision-making than I wanted to be: there was an unequal power relation between the children and me. This was inevitably dictated by my non-sharable technical and theoretical knowledge and by the fact that it was simply impossible to make a film with 34 children all together in such a short period of time. Hence, I needed to make compromises. At a production level, my first compromise was to work with only four of them, the oldest, who were aged between 12 and 13. However, while taking this decision, I also decided to allow everyone else (age 7 to 9) to come 'behind the camera' to comment and make suggestions whenever they wanted to. A second compromise was to abandon the idea of pre-constructing a story with them and instead follow their experimentation. Allow me to expand on this point.
- 8 The project started with me introducing the camera to the community after a few weeks I was living with them. In practical terms, this introduction meant me filming them in a traditional sense of using a video camera (cf. Battaglia 2006b). Gradually, I started presenting the camera to the children in a different way – that is, as a medium they could also experiment with and through which they could discover different 'looks' about their

everyday life (cf. Battaglia 2006c). By doing this, my intention was to be able to discuss together what to do with this tool. Yet, I soon realised that 'producing something comprehensible' by 'building up a narrative' was simply an inappropriate idea for that context, given my limited time in that community. I therefore decided to reconsider my approach and try to make more room for their own understandings. As Worth and Adair's put it, this involves comprehending "how a group of people structure their view of the world – their reality – through film" (1972: 7 emphasis in original). This awareness was for me crucial to set up the remaining filming period.

- 9 While realising that I could not do away with the asymmetrical relationship between the children and me, I chose to minimise this unbalance. In order to achieve this, at that time I was left with nothing more than letting the children decide when to turn the camera on and off as well as decide what to shoot, even when it was me handling the camera. In other words, they started 'directing' our film. The result was a collection of footage of children playing on the playground, dancing and singing, doing yoga sessions (Battaglia 2006d), celebrating special festivities such as the Indian Independence day (Battaglia 2006e), participating in day-out-trips in some local temples and dams (Battaglia 2006f) and, for those few who had the possibility, meeting their real parents or some relatives once in a while.
- 10 In the overall process, there had been a single moment in which I believed I could almost have a similar power relation with one specific boy, Manikkam. In a specific moment in the footage, we can see me walking away from the camera, trusting Manikkam as a person capable to take care of the technology in an appropriate way (cf. Battaglia 2006g: 02:19–02:46). From then onwards, this boy got in charge of the camera also when other children were filming. As this occurred, the film-subject of this project was also upturned. I suddenly became the main character (or the 'heroine') of the film. While this may seem an obvious follow up, it is also true that this needs to be contextualised in the Tamil cinema milieu where children are continuously exposed to Tamil films, their heroes and their songs. According to Sarah Dickey (1995) indeed, it is almost impossible to visit South India and not be struck by the overwhelming presence of cinema. There, cinema is a "public spectacle" both inside and outside the theatre (Dickey 1995: 131). Songs and dances, in particular, play a fundamental role in Tamil cinema culture (see Baskaran 1996). This is true to the extent that according to Das Gupta "music" in urban areas and rural periphery widely means "film music" and "dances", although most likely taken from Hollywood musicals, have become "peculiarly Indian" (1991: 63).
- 11 In line with the way in which literature about Tamil cinema depicts the poorest part of South India in connection to film movies, the children I worked with spent most of their time practicing dance-moves coming from their movies and mimicking heroes and heroines (Battaglia 2006h). In this context, what I noticed was that while in their everyday imagery these children had a male presence (that is, their uncle Ravi) to associate with their ideal 'hero', they lacked a female presence that, for them, could play the role of the 'heroine'. Hence, my sudden presence in our film became crucial. I would have been the 'heroine'.<sup>2</sup> When I realised this, I decided that in line with the spirit of minimising our asymmetrical power-relation, I could play this role for them, especially if this mainly meant having me in the frame dancing and/or performing with them (Battaglia 2006g). This choice became central in the post-production process to which I turn my attention now.

## Post-production

- 12 The post-production moment is that in which the footage comes together as a 'film' and images acquire different meanings depending on their composition. As Toril Jenssen puts it, "the researcher or the producer of the text is responsible of it, irrespective of the various interpretations that may occur when reading [or I would say 'experiencing', when we talk about films and other art forms] the text" (2009: 68). Accordingly, if in the production stage of this project I tried my best to make these children 'as equal as possible' to me, in the editing of the film, this was in fact a much more difficult task.
- 13 To start with, it was important for me to edit the first cut of the film while still being based in the farm. In this way, I would have left the community feeling that I had returned something concrete to them – that is, a DVD of our experience. Additionally, at that time, I felt that watching this 'film' as a 'film', rather than as 'footage', would have enabled the children to better understand the potential of the filmic tool and what they could create with it. However, limited by technology, time and language, I was not able to involve these children in the full post-production process and could only ask them to occasionally come to my small house, located in the middle of the farm, and comment on some of the sequences. Certainly, as the children were not trained in constructing meanings through images, their comments were not particularly useful to make a serious and intelligible work of 'montage' understood as a "manipulative filmic device[...] for transcending the limitations of human vision" (cf. Suhr and Willerslev 2012: 283). In other words, I was there left alone with my dilemmas regarding participatory filmmaking. Who was the author of the project? Whose vision should have come across? Whose film was this? And if it was Nila Illam children's film, what was my role as a facilitator of their vision in the editing process? Finally, for whom was this film meant?
- 14 These questions preoccupied me while trying to put edited sequences together, and as a consequence of these thoughts, I eventually decided not to make a film. In other words, incapable of creating a product that Jay Ruby describes as something through which "the audience assumes that the producer, the process of making, and the product are a coherent whole" (1988: 65), I decided to create a 'non-film'. What I did then was to edit the material by simply following the chronological narrative that came out from the footage, as it was taken over the few weeks of filming. Yet, believing that even this was in the end one of my own filmic choices, what I decided to do was to intervene in this linear and diachronic construction with musical elements coming from the children's everyday engagement with Tamil movie songs.
- 15 Following my ethnographic intuition (distinctive of any fieldworker), I felt that my deliberate musical intervention in the construction of the meanings of this project would have been closer to the children's preferences. I also felt, that if my intuition was wrong, I would have at least pleased the children by satisfying their 'movie expectation' stemming from Tamil cinema culture. In order to achieve this, I hence decided to take pen and paper, follow a few children along their daily activities and ask them to write for me the title of some of the songs they were singing in those weeks. With a list in hand (double checked by uncle Ravi), I went to a music store in Pondicherry and asked to burn a CD for me with all these songs. Thanks to this CD, I had been able to place several of the children's favourite songs in the final 58 min edited 'non-film'. My use of music sometimes followed the real encounter with the camera captured in the footage and

other times emphasised daily common activities as a sort of soundtrack (cf. Battaglia 2006e: 00:24-01:28).

- 16 The day before leaving for the UK I managed to finish this 'non-film' and organised a screening event with the children in the farm with a projector and a mobile maxi-screen. As written on my field-notes, that evening the scene was the following:  
Ravi first asked the children whether they wanted to watch our film or whether they would have preferred a Tamil movie. The answer was unanimous: 'movie, movie, movie!!' Ravi agreed with the children. I got confused. Yet, Ravi cleverly asked them the permission to only check whether the DVD of our film was working or not. The children let him check our DVD while waiting for the main show. But as soon as the video started they got all surprised, wanting to watch more.
- 17 As the screening proceeded, different children stood up as they recognised themselves in the image. The children laughed. One loudly said in English 'Giulia, me... camera!?' [– meaning 'that's me filming!']. When the songs accompanied the images someone started to sing along. When my way of placing the songs in the video became predictable, someone else started to guess what was coming next, singing in anticipation the imminent song. In their own way, the children actively interacted with the film. In some moments of the evening I wished I had the camera with me to record this event! However, for the sake of the experience, I felt it was better as it was. All 34 children found a range of different ways to thank me throughout the screening and afterward. Many came out with broken sentences in English such as: 'Giulia, we, friends?' or 'Giulia, me... with you!' or 'Giulia, you England? You back?' Even those who resisted participating in the making of the film, found a way to thank me. In the middle of the screening there was one in particular, one of Manikkam's brothers called Muthu, who moved from where he sat – that is, away from me – to come to me and sit on my lap! I was happy. I felt it was a success and at that moment I also felt that despite my struggle, in the end, I did make a film. Yet, was this really the case?

Figure 1. Nila Illam children.



Author's photograph, August 2006.

- 18 The ethnographic material presented above can be read as a self-reflexive process of making a participatory video project where in Sarah Elder's words, "the maker and the subject are different – different in cultural background, gender, social power, economics, language, filmmaking knowledge etc." (1995: 94). While Elder (amongst others) believes that through a close interaction with subjects involved in the image-making process we can achieve forms of 'collaboration' (ibid), I would argue that this is seldom possible when we only focus on the relationship between the maker and the film-subject. Audiences, or film-viewers, are in fact not excluded in this process and play a heavy role in the production of meanings of any form of audio-visual representation (see also Hughes 2011; Crawford and Hafsteinsson 1993). What we can achieve from a project like the one I conducted in Tamil Nadu is a tight 'craft' (Adamson 2007) of 'participation', which might have positive outcomes on the community involved but not necessarily communicate to the audience to which it may be intended. To better explain this point, let me make a theoretical detour into some discussions regarding representation in both visual and non-visual ethnographic practices. Such a detour will enable me to overturn the role of audiences in audio-visual practices, better explain the way I take distance from the conventional understanding of participatory film and introduce my second film project, which is concerned more explicitly with 'collaborative' (rather than 'participatory') film endeavours.

## A theoretical discussion on representation

- 19 At their outset, the two audio-visual projects discussed in this text were conceptualised as two documentary films. Hence, I shall begin by pointing out how anthropologists and documentary filmmakers share common features in their research practice. In order to

do this, let me start from a reflection on questions regarding representation and interpretation.

- 20 In a late 1980s publication, Susan Sontag argues that the anthropologist “is engaged in saving his own soul, by a curious and ambitious act of intellectual catharsis” (1986: 75). Drawing on Fred Myers (1991), I would say that if this is true, the anthropologist is surely not alone in his or her interpretative activity. Documentary filmmakers (as well as other practitioners dealing with representation) are, in fact, involved in an act of ‘intellectual catharsis’, similar to the one described by Sontag. The argument proposed by Robert Edmond in the early 1970s is for me an exceptionally persuasive endorsement of this point. Edmond analyses the significance of documentary film through an anthropological lens and says,

Let us agree that the word documentary denotes a kind of film that presents, in some manner or another, reality or actuality (whatever they may mean). But, unless that reality or actuality relates in a clear way to humans, how do we recognize the meaningfulness of reality and actuality? [...] Consider: the relationship of man to the world in which he lives [...]. These points of agreement provide us with the definition of documentary film. Documentary is simply anthropology on film! (Edmonds 1974: 14, emphasis in original).

- 21 Due to its relational human nature, Edmonds juxtaposes the filmmaking activity with the anthropological investigation. Not far from this perspective, yet contextualised in the domain of documentary film practice per se, Dai Vaughan (1999) argues that if it is true that the camera is a device that alters reality, “it is difficult, in such cases, to charge the camera with ‘distortion’. Rather, it is in the nature of [...] events to change their nature according to expectations of public response” (1999: 56, emphasis in original). In other words, Vaughan asserts that any kind of fieldworker, whether an anthropologist, a camera-operator or a film director, should be prepared to deal with an interpretation of the notion of ‘objectivity’ (ibid). Talking from a ‘pure’ anthropological perspective (as opposed to a ‘visual’ but also ‘applied’, ‘activist’, ‘public’ or ‘engaged’ anthropological perspective), Christopher Davis makes an argument similar to the authors mentioned above. She argues that the ethnographer’s methodological investigation is an exercise towards “documentary art” (Davis 2000: 11). This investigation is an intervention that, in Davis’ words, “underwrites an appropriate redefinition of realism in ethnographic representation – that is, the consideration of ethnography as a documentary art” (ibid).
- 22 During a lecture to first year anthropology students, whom I was teaching as a teaching assistant, Christopher Davis drew a triangular model and explained to the class that the triangle could be understood as a triad made of the ‘anthropologist’, the ‘subject’ and the ‘reader’. On that occasion, she argued that the combination of these three elements constituted the “overall knowledge” (to use her terminology) that the anthropologist gains from the fieldwork process. Davis calls this knowledge “documentary art” (2000: 11). To her, anthropologists combine their relationship with the subject of study (let us say some ‘locals’) with a presumed reader’s expectations (let us say ‘academia’) about the subject of study. For Davis (2000) ‘documentary art’ becomes a kind of ‘packaged’ knowledge that characterises the anthropological research as a whole. By being this, ‘documentary’ becomes something constructed and made of different elements, such as fieldwork reality (the subject), imagined reality (the reader) and interpreted reality (the anthropologist). And ‘art’ appears to be in line with Alfred Gell’s perception of art as a component of technology – that is, “the outcome of technical process [...] in which artists

are skilled" (1992: 43, 1999: 162). For Gell, this outcome is the 'art object', understood as "a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic prepositions about it" (1998: 6). In his words, "nothing is decidable in advance about the nature of this object, because the theory is premised on the idea that the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix" (1998: 7). Gell thus defines the study of "social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency" as "anthropology of art", where art objects become "the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents" (ibid).

- 23 More specifically, Davis' use of 'art' should be read in close relation to the work of Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Thomas who, building upon Gell's theory, see art "as a special technology that captivates and ensnares others in the intentionalities of its producers" (Pinney and Thomas 2001: vii). If this is the case, I suggest that the role of the 'anthropologist' and the role of the 'reader', mentioned above, may be respectively exchanged with, or shared by, the role of the 'filmmaker', and that of the 'audience'. In other words, we may be able to understand documentary film (and more broadly image-making practices) as a documentary art and, following Davis's (2000) process of thinking, even as ethnography.

Figure 2. Classic triangle

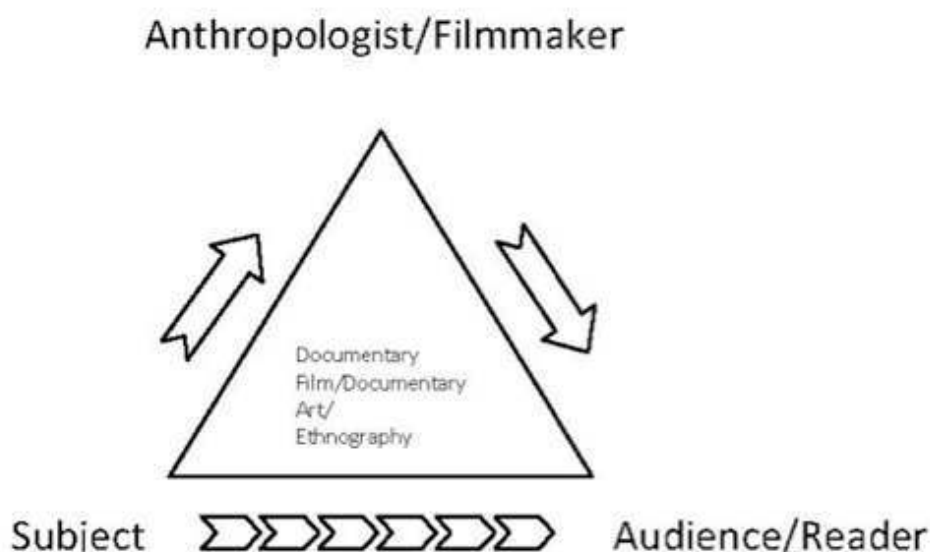


Diagram by the author inspired by a diagram drawn by Christopher Davis on the blackboard of a BA classroom at SOAS in January 2011

- 24 In actual fact, the relationship between filmmaker and subject, filmmaker and audiences, and filmmaker and filmmaking process has been of anthropological interest since the late 1950s and early 1960s. In particular, it became of such interest when the anthropologist-filmmaker Jean Rouch furthered the tradition of documentation of cultures through filmic forms – until then largely considered as another form of "anthropological note-taking" (MacDougall 1998: 131). Rouch introduced more reflexivity to this tradition. He suggested new techniques through which the filmmaker could work in close relation with his or her subject of study. A more reflexive practice was for Rouch a way to create a "shared anthropology" (1978: 7). This approach opened up a wide debate about representation in both filmmaking and anthropology, which began to be known as 'visual

anthropology' – that is, in Grimshaw and Ravetz's description, "an experimental space within the discipline" of anthropology (2010: 149). Moreover, Rouch's approach inspired new ways of making films within and outside anthropology – that is, towards a more 'participatory' or 'collaborative' film-making.

- 25 Surely, when I conceptualised the two audio-visual projects presented in this article, Rouch's techniques, and more broadly the 'participatory' and 'collaborative' documentary mode, influenced my approach. Yet, these were not the only one. While being concerned about my relationship with the film-subject, in fact, I was also interested in a possible relationship with my film-viewers. This additional concern was inspired by another 'branch' of anthropology, more concerned with media practices at large.
- 26 The filmmaker-subject-audience relationship has also been of interest to those anthropologists not directly working in visual anthropology but whose focus was on media production and/or media consumption. According to Faye Ginsburg et al (2002), in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a theoretical and methodological rupture within the discipline of anthropology. 'Media' as a subject came forward as a field of anthropological study. In Maurice Mahon's words, "as mass media and consumer popular culture forms continue to make incursions into the regions where they have traditionally worked, anthropologists have begun to study the ways in which consumers use these forms" (2000: 468). The question that emerged in this period was: how is media production constructed? This led to the exploration of what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) defines as the "field of cultural production" – that is, the field of power-relations around any work of art. In addition, another question emerged asking: how do media matter to audiences? (Ginsburg 1994: 137). This led to investigations into the multiple ways in which audiences use media to relate to the world, to create their own knowledge and, to paraphrase Stuart Hall (1980), become both the "source" and the "receiver" of the message. In short, from the 1980s onwards anthropologists have drawn attention to both the production of mediated cultures (often addressed as the field of cultural production) and to media consumption (better known as audience studies). Nevertheless, these anthropological approaches have seldom interacted with the field of visual anthropology or to wider questions concerning representation within the discipline of anthropology at large, as discussed above.
- 27 I would argue that if we take into account the triangular relationship of a filmmaking practice mentioned above, and expand its meaning to any kind of cultural (media) representation and image-making practice, we can emphasise the following. While the field of cultural production (or study of cultural producers) is interested in the study of the makers/producers of social (and mediated) practices, the one of media consumption (or study of audiences) pays attention to recipients, audiences, or consumers. Visual anthropology (or study of ethnographic films, discussed above), instead, specialises in the subject of study of the triangular process of representation. Transposed to the way I explore my two audio-visual projects in this article, and more broadly documentary film practices in my research (cf. Battaglia 2012b), I would say that these three emphases constitute together what we may call the 'study of image-making'. Image-making is here understood as the product of the interwoven relationship between image-maker, image-subject and image-viewer (and their respective anthropological studies). Moreover, if we return to the way I started this section, I would suggest that similar to the anthropological investigation, the study of image/film-making (understood as a practice) is also a form of 'documentary art'.

- 28 As a form of documentary art, the question that preoccupied me while constructing the aforementioned Nila Illam project concerns the agency of these 'documentary art forms' in relation to their maker, their subject and their viewer – understood as a conjoined triad. Indeed, in accordance with Stephen Hughes (2011), I also argue that it is not possible to speak about any audio-visual media without assuming some relationship with an audience. Having said this, when (visual and non-visual) anthropologists raise questions concerning 'authorship' (Ginsburg 1995; Ruby 1995; Elder 1995; Jensen 2009), 'positionality' (Jenkins 1994; Ronzon 2007; Gunn 2007) and even 'skilled vision' (Grasseni 2007) their concern is often addressed to either the subject of research/art practice or to the audience. To my knowledge, there is scarcely any study that focuses on the relationship between the maker, the subject and the viewer all together – unless we choose to think of this triad as a performance, in the Fabians' sense of the term of 'giving form to'. Even when Tim Ingold talks about ways of seeing as "functional of the practical activity in which we are engaged" (2000: 24), his concern is always about a dialectical, yet dual, relationship between agents rather than about the articulation of a triangular dynamism. For me, instead, the interwoven relationship between maker-subject-audience constitutes the cornerstone of any art (and anthropological) practice. Surely, this triangulation led the foundation of the postproduction work of the Nila Illam project and the conceptualisation of *The Electric Oriental Journey*, to which I turn my attention in a moment.
- 29 In conjunction with the triangular representational model presented in this section, my two audio-visual projects pose questions regarding 'participation' and 'collaboration' as two different sorts of 'mobile ways of crafting' (Adamson 2007) film projects or as a series of positions taken in relation to the process of representation. These questions underline the impossibility of paying equal attention to the film-subject and the film-viewer when such roles are casted within the traditional narrative structure, based on dual relationships – namely, the maker in relation to the subject or the viewer. In contrast, thinking of such triangulation in relation to emerging academic debates concerning what is being called 'interactive' (Galloway et al 2007; Blassnigg 2005; Favero 2013, 2014), 'database' (Hudson 2008) or 'web' (Nash 2012) documentary can enable us to better locate projects like the ones I present here.
- 30 Contemporary theorisations about multi-modal and interactive documentary art practice, indeed, call for a more active viewership, continuously pushed against conventional stereotypes (Favero 2013). By so doing, these approaches challenge the traditional dual dynamics of audio-visual art practices in visual anthropology and visual culture at large (cf. Wright 1998). They move from what Dale Hudson called 'fixed modes' (such as the expository and/or observational approach) towards 'open modes', including collaborative, reflexive and/or interactive methods (2008: 89). These contemporary theorisations emphasise mobile and flexible forms of representations not far from the work of Howard (1988), Pink (2006, 2011), Wesch (2007) and Biella (2007), who stress the potential that multi-modal platforms of representations offer to traditional ethnography. Furthermore, these contemporary theories also open up possibilities of reconnecting with the complex way in which Aby Warburg theorised the idea of 'atlas' – that is, as an unfinished map creation that continuously generate representational possibilities for the limited vocabulary of human expression (Forster 1976: 175). Certainly for me it is the case that this latter concept has been the most useful for retrospectively reflecting on my two audio-visual projects. I now return to these projects in order to unpack this point.

## Thinking about film-viewer and multi-modality

- 31 After conducting the Nila Illam participatory project in Tamil Nadu, I returned to England enthusiastic about my experience and the final product I managed to create with these children. I therefore organised a few screenings with friends, colleagues and anthropologists senior to me. It was thanks to these occasions that I realised how for general viewers the *process* of making this work was more important than its final outcome. Indeed, in that form, the 'film' could have been a 'film' only for the film-subject but surely not for a general film-viewer. If I wanted to screen it to anthropologists and students, it was necessary to add an explanation of the process behind it. In other words, it was as if, in the way the film was edited, the subject and the viewer of the project became the same beings (that is, only the children) and the role of the maker was transformed not in that of a mediator or a translator of culture but into a facilitator of a process. In short, as it was, the video project did not contribute to any form of 'representation' but, perhaps, mediated the ways in which a community of children think about themselves through the use of the video camera.
- 32 As Jenssen nicely puts it, "it is challenging to create an acceptable representation which violates neither 'truth' nor the involved people, while at the same time fulfilling aesthetic needs" (2009: 17). For Jenssen, what she calls the "intertextuality of experience" is to be found in the field, creating a sort of "communicative meaning" in relation to the film-subject (Jenssen 2009: 18). For me this intertextuality is instead to be created in post-production – especially (yet not exclusively) with contemporary technological possibilities. As said by Alfred Gell, indeed, "technology not only consists of the artefacts which are employed as tools, but also includes the sum total of the kinds of knowledge which make possible the invention, making and use of tools" (1988: 6). Accordingly, I suggest that thanks to the use of digital technology it is today possible to be 'aesthetically communicative' to a more general audience as much as being respectful about the process of filming with the community. If the classic ethnographic film is not an appropriate form of representation for displaying the triangular relationship between the maker, the subject and the viewer, then multi-modal platforms of representation can indeed offer an alternative.
- 33 When in the late 1970s Walter Benjamin (1978) talked about film he referred, amongst other things, to the capability of the medium to look at the same art-object from different angles. At that time, he identified in the filmic medium technological possibilities that were useful to develop different kinds of looks. In contrast to such view, if we draw our attention to film practices that have exclusively developed in the history of anthropology, we can observe that by and large, they have rather worked towards a unidirectional 'vision', which today is conventionally known as 'ethnographic film' within and outside anthropology (cf. Wright 1998; Suhr and Willerslev 2012, 2013). Although discursively it is still difficult to define what an 'ethnographic film' is and entails, it is as if over years of film practices visual anthropologists have acquired a 'skilled vision' (Grasseni 2007) which has enabled them(/us) to include and exclude films within the category of 'ethnographic film'. By so doing, the skilled vision on ethnographic films has become a hegemonic vision upon possible film practices existent in anthropology. This point emerged very clearly during the Visual Anthropology Programme at IUAES Congress (Manchester 2013). In particular, in one of his public forewords, Andy Lawrence, from the Granada Centre at the

University of Manchester underlined how visual anthropology got trapped in a history dictated by a few well-known anthropologists-practitioners. He also pointed out how at present we can no longer identify a dominant view coming from an outstanding filmmaker-anthropologist; rather, we are experiencing a multitude of image-making practices. In other words, this history can no longer be representative of a multitude of approaches that characterise the contemporary scene. If this is true, in line with the anthropological discussions on multi-modality of ethnographic representations (Wesch 2007; Biella 2007; Pink 2006, 2011), I would also say that this history can no longer exclude the technological possibilities that digital technology is offering when in dialogue with other visual fields (cf. Galloway et al 2007; Blassnigg 2005; Lapenta 2011; Favero 2013, 2014; Hudson 2008; Nash 2012; Battaglia and Favero 2014). Surely, this theoretical awareness brought me to the making of *The Electric Oriental Journey*, to which I shall finally turn my attention here to bring this discussion to a close.

### The Electric Oriental Journey<sup>3</sup>

- 34 Two years after the 'non-film experience' with Nila Illam, I conducted another project called *The Electric Oriental Journey* (Battaglia 2009). I shot this film in India with the active participation of the film-subject, Elettra – an Italian friend of mine visiting India for the first time. In post-production I crafted this film in collaboration with an Indian filmmaker, Nilanjan Bhattacharya.
- 35 The filming of this work occurred between December and January 2007-08 when Elettra came to visit India while I was living there. Over three weeks, she allowed me to film her travelling, watching and experiencing India. I deliberately decided not to interfere much with Elettra's view but to observe how her ideas were constantly in movement with her travelling and therefore with her new experiences. While editing this material though, I unpredictably struggled with stereotyped images of India that unintentionally came out from Elettra's narration even though she was simply experiencing and commenting to the camera her journey in India. In order to elude another typecast of India, and in the light of the Nila Illam self-reflexive experience around questions of representation, I therefore decided not to carry on with this work. This time, however, my preoccupation was less on my film-subject but more on my potential film-viewers and their possible interpretation of the final product as a 'documentary art'. As already said, the maker of any audio-visual project is the ultimate person responsible for the final product and the meaning that this product may carry with it. Hence, I did not feel ready to continue with this film and decided to only send a rough cut to Elettra as a token of our travel-experience. Other than that, the first rough cut of this film was left as it was for several months.
- 36 At that time, I was conducting fieldwork for my PhD, studying local documentary film practices in India. By fieldwork default, several filmmakers became my friends; one of these was Nilanjan Bhattacharya. One day he came to visit me in Chennai and in one of our multiple conversations about films, I mentioned to him the travel project with Elettra. He insisted in watching the rough cut of the film. After so doing, he convinced me that we should have re-worked this project together. I eventually agreed; and from this moment onwards, we both engaged in a deeper interpretation of images and Elettra's narrative. Having a second point of view to challenge mine – especially one from a filmmaker who had lived and worked in India his whole life – was a stimulating

intervention in the re-editing of the film. Our attempt was to emphasise both the complicity between me (the maker) and Elettra (the subject) but also the differences existing between hers and my view on India.

Figure 3. Still from 'The Electric Oriental Journey'.



Author's photograph, December 2007

- 37 After almost one year of discussion and occasional collaboration, Nilanjan and I came out with *The Electric Oriental Journey*. Today this is a film shot in an observational style with an active participation of its film-subject (Elettra) but re-designed in post-production in an 'interventionist' and 'non-ethnographic' mode (in the conventional understanding of the term, cf. Wright 1998). The film makes use of different fictional elements – ranging from texts to music – to address issues connected to the different yet similar 'selves' of a tourist and an anthropologist (cf. Simoni and McCabe 2008) and to the contribution of guidebooks to the stereotypes of travel destinations (cf. Bhattacharyya 1997).
- 38 For the argument of this article, what is interesting about the making of this film is not only to reflect on the character's (Elettra) strong participation but also on the centrality that a potential, imagined film-viewer acquired in the post-production process. As already said, unlike the Nila Illam experience, in this case the viewer played a fundamental role. However, who was such 'ideal' viewer? While editing the work, I realised that although I wanted this work being of anthropological interest, in reality I also wanted this film to be appreciated in India and in particular by people I was working with – namely, filmmakers and media students. It is because of this mixed range of audiences that when I burnt a DVD of what I then considered a finished cut of *The Electric Oriental Journey*, I decided to organise a pilot screening with media students and a few filmmakers in India as well as sending this copy to a few people in Europe – including another Italian who travelled in India, a student of anthropology in the UK and a senior anthropologist specialised in India.

- 39 One interesting outcome of this pilot 'viewing experiment' was that while those based in Europe could see the difference between my view and Elettra's view on India, my Indian friends, colleagues and students could not. With such an unexpected result I was therefore forced to take another decision: either to leave the film as it was and try to circulate it for a non-Indian audience or re-work again on the editing. After consulting my friend-colleague Nilanjan, I decided to go for the second option adding even more direct 'interventionist' elements to the linear narrative. By shifting my position from a director into that of a joined 'orchestrator' (Favero 2014: 171), I worked with Nilanjan towards the creation of a sort of several 'micro film sequences' within the film narrative that would have pushed the audience towards a (pro)active viewership (cf. Battaglia and Favero 2014). The result was the official final copy of *The Electric Oriental Journey* (Battaglia 2009), a film that I showed in various seminars and screenings and, as commented by various viewers, makes my point of view even too straightforward. In short, it is a film that makes Indians laugh, but it is a film that anthropologists do not necessarily like to refer to if not through the thinking of its process. My film-voice is indeed too strong and not necessarily of conventional anthropological interest.
- 40 Though from a perspective different from Nila Illam, the result of this second film was nevertheless quite similar to the previous one: the crafting of the film became more interesting than the film itself. Translating this concept into the way I see any form of representation (that is, as a triangular relationship between the maker, the subject and the viewer), what I think lacked in both projects – if conceived of within the traditional understanding of ethnographic films – was to follow my own sensitivity in relation to the 'documentary art' and to fulfil conventional "aesthetic needs" (Jenssen 2009: 17) that is archetypal in any image-making practice. Instead, if from their inception these projects had been thought within the framework of multi-modality and interactivity they could have better fulfilled their purpose. Indeed, the moment in which I had the possibility to discuss these projects with anthropological audiences in seminars, classrooms and conferences (that is, in contexts in which I could supplement the audio-visual with my oral argumentation and vice versa) I realised that these films had a further potential.<sup>4</sup> They worked as sorts of 'atlas' within which the audio-visual material was not objectified within a 'film genre' (Altman 1999), such as for instance, a 'documentary' or 'ethnographic' film, but was instead treated as a 'craft' or 'a moving target' (Adamson 2007) that is useful to underpin the image-making practice per se. In other words, it was as if the conventional way of thinking of a film constructed with a beginning, middle and end, could not convey the implication of my project. Rather, my intention of emphasising the significance of working in participation with film-subjects and in collaboration with another cultural producer (cf. Mahon 2000) emerged fairly clearly through the use of multi-modal platforms of image-making that combine video and text.<sup>5</sup>
- 41 To conclude, if I have to translate this awareness into existing discussions about anthropology and digital technology, I would need to echo Sarah Pink's (2006, 2011) argument that digital technology and visual anthropology should today be regarded as two sides of the same coin. As Pink points out, "while visual anthropologists are increasingly interested in digital media, practitioners of 'digital anthropology' increasingly use (audio)visual media in their work" (2011: 213-214). Perhaps, the moment in which I realised that my films could become 'non-films' outside their conventional understanding within visual anthropology, it was also the moment in which I saw myself trapped between two similar but not always connected branches of anthropology – one

concerned with films and the other with media at large. As already discussed in this article, these two anthropological approaches are distinguished by a historically determined difference in their engagement with either the subject or the audience of the anthropological (and artistic) investigation, and have both inspired my practice in diverse ways. In this respect, I have suggested that film-subject and film-viewer (and in turn their respective anthropological investigations) should be regarded as complementary agents of the craft of representation and creation of 'documentary art' (see also Battaglia 2012b).

42 'Participatory' and 'collaborative' filmmaking(s) should be regarded as the crafts of films (or 'documentary arts') in relation to respectively their film-subject or their film-viewer. Nonetheless, taking into account both the film-subject and the film-viewer during the process of making a film is often an impossible task. In my experience of making *Nila Illam* and *The Electric Oriental Journey*, this impossibility brought me to the creation of what might be seen as 'non-films' or 'unsuccessful films' from the perspective of the conventional tradition of visual anthropology (cf. Wright 1998). Besides, this impossibility brought me to self-reflect a-posteriori on such practices. Yet, the self-reflection of a film production is not a unique experience that exclusively characterised my practice. Other people have self-reflect on film-making and wrote about such processes. What I have proposed here, however, is to think of these self-reflexive moments in relation to both the film-subject and the film-viewer and in relation to contemporary technological possibilities and multi-modal representations.

43 On the basis of my ethnographic encounters and audio-visual projects, I would finally suggest that as sorts of 'atlas', contemporary multi-modal platforms of image-making afford the potential for more 'democratic' forms of audio-visual representations. They make a dialogue between the maker, the subjects and the viewer possible, especially when only the maker is directly involved in the post-production process of knowledge-making. By so doing, multi-modal productions of images also push us to critically re-think conventional ways of making ethnographic films. Through this re-thinking it might be possible to imagine and enact more productive forms of 'participation' with film subjects in our representational modes of address, and of 'collaboration' between cultural producers.

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## NOTES

1. With 'unknown children' I refer to children that the organization found on the street without any document or traceable relationship of kin.
2. It may be important to point out that the moment I arrived in the farm coincided with the moment in which an Indian woman working in the community and very close to the children left the farm after getting married. While there, I never had the chance to meet this woman.
3. For the sake of my argument, I will spare details of the production of *The Electric Oriental Journey* and focus primarily on its post-production construction. Indeed, as already mentioned in the introduction of this article, this second project strongly built on my previous experience with Nila Illam.
4. Nila Illam project was part of the 'Participatory Video Seminar' organized by the Royal Anthropological Institute for the 11th International Festival of Ethnographic Film (Metropolitan University, Leeds, June 2009). I presented *The Electric Oriental Journey* at the conference 'Emotion in Motion: the Passions of Tourism, Travel and Movement' (Metropolitan University, Leeds, July 2009) and at the 1st International Visual Method Conference (University of Leeds, September 2009).

5. In this specific case, with multi-modal platforms I refer to any forms of representation that can include text, audio and video. This can vary from a simple power point – which I have used when I presented the two projects discussed in this article – to online platforms such as youtube or vimeo – where I have now uploaded this material. However, my sense of the term is not limited to these platforms but it extends to digital archives, installations, interactive databases, video games, i-docs to mention a few. To read more on this theme, see Battaglia and Favero (2014).

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## ABSTRACTS

This article seeks to explore questions concerning participation, collaboration, voices, visions and multi-modal representations in the image-making process. It is a retrospective self-reflection on two audio-visual projects, 'Nila Illam' and 'The Electric Oriental Journey', conducted by myself in India respectively in 2006 and 2009. In this piece I discuss different ways of crafting audio-visual projects in relation to the film-subject and film-viewer. Thinking of image-making as a triangular rather than dual process between actors (that is, maker-subject-viewer) and of the image-maker as the mediator of such process will be the cornerstone of my analysis. I demonstrate that participatory and collaborative films are sometimes impossible to be realised in their theoretical and methodological intent if they are simultaneously understood in relation to such triangular relationship of image-making, and within the conventionally dual tradition of documentary and ethnographic film practices (maker-subject or maker-viewer). In contrast to that, I argue that 'participatory' and 'collaborative' audio-visual projects may not only be successfully realised as films but also allow visual/media anthropologists to concurrently explore their relationship with the film-subject (and/or informant) and film-viewer (and/or reader), on condition that we rethink such kinds of projects in relation to contemporary debates about multi-modal representations.

Este artículo se propone discutir un conjunto de cuestiones relativas a la participación, la colaboración, las diferentes voces y las representaciones multi-modales que entran en juego en el proceso de construcción de la imagen. Se trata de una autoreflexión de carácter retrospectivo sobre dos proyectos audiovisuales: 'Nila Illam' y 'The Electric Oriental Journey', realizados por mí misma en la India en los años 2006 y 2009 respectivamente. En este trabajo analizo diferentes formas de llevar a cabo proyectos audiovisuales en relación al sujeto filmado y al espectador. La piedra angular de mi análisis consiste en considerar el proceso de construcción de la imagen como una relación triangular (esto es, entre realizador-sujeto-espectador), en vez de considerarlo como un proceso dual entre actores; y en entender el realizador como el mediador de dicho proceso. En el texto demuestro que las películas participativas o colaborativas son a veces imposibles de realizar respetando sus principios teóricos y metodológicos si se las concibe a la vez a partir de la relación triangular de la construcción de la imagen mencionada anteriormente, y dentro de la tradicional convención dual propia de la práctica del cine etnográfico y documental (realizador-sujeto o realizador-espectador). En oposición a esto, defiendo que los proyectos audiovisuales "participativos" y "colaborativos" se pueden llevar a cabo satisfactoriamente en tanto que películas, a la vez que permiten al antropólogo visual o antropólogo de los media explorar su relación con el sujeto fílmico (y/o el informante) y el espectador (y/o lector), siempre bajo la condición de que repensemos este tipo de proyectos a partir de los debates contemporáneos sobre las representaciones multi-modales.

Cet article propose d'analyser les questions concernant les notions de participation, de collaboration, de vision ainsi que les représentations multimodales lors de la production de films. Il s'agit d'une réflexion personnelle rétrospective sur deux projets audio visuels « Nila Illam » et « Le voyage oriental électrique » que j'ai réalisés en Inde, respectivement en 2006 et 2009. Dans cet article, j'aborde les différentes manières de concevoir des projets audiovisuels qui prennent en compte tant le sujet du film que le spectateur. Appréhender la production d'images non comme un procédé dual mais comme une triangulation entre les différents protagonistes (réalisateur, sujet, spectateur) et appréhender le réalisateur comme le médiateur d'un tel processus sont les arguments développés dans cet article. Je démontre que les films participatifs ou collaboratifs sont quelque fois impossibles à réaliser compte tenu de leur intention théorique et méthodologique s'ils sont perçus d'une part dans le prolongement de la relation triangulaire de la production d'images et d'autre part dans le cadre des films ethnographiques et documentaires conventionnels. Par contre, s'ils sont conçus dans l'esprit qui anime les débats actuels autour des représentations multimodales participatives et collaboratives, les projets audio visuels peuvent non seulement être des films réussis mais ils peuvent permettre aux anthropologues visuels d'explorer en même temps leur relations aux sujets du film et aux spectateurs.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** participation, collaboration, ethnographic film, multi-modality, representation, practice, vision, authorship

**Palabras claves:** participación, colaboración, cine etnográfico, multi-modalidad, representación, práctica, visión, autoría

**Mots-clés:** participation, collaboration, film ethnographique, multimodalité, représentation, pratique, vision, auteur

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