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# MERCY

## The Dissertation

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“I believe that the maker of images has the moral obligation to reveal the covert – to never appear to produce an objective mirror by which the world can see its ‘true’ image. For in doing so we strengthen the status quo, support the repressive forces of this world, and continue to alienate those people we claim to be concerned about. So long as our images of the world continue to be sold as *the* image of the world, we are being unethical.”

(Jay Ruby, 2000: p. 148)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The way in which indigenous people are represented in documentaries has radically changed within the last century. But “If there (still) is one overriding ethical / political / ideological / question to documentary filmmaking it may be, *What to do with the people*” (Nichols qtd. in Barbash and Taylor, 1997: p. 12). How can people and issues be represented appropriately? How can one make a documentary about somebody or something with a totally different cultural background to one’s own without being unethical?

The so-called expository documentary was the first prevailing documentary mode and tries to answer these questions with an authoritative voice-over commentary combined with a series of images that aim to be descriptive and informative. The voice-over approaches the spectator directly and offers facts or arguments that are illustrated by the images. It provides abstract information that the image cannot carry or comments on those actions and events that are unfamiliar to the target audience. This is exactly what some filmmakers reacted against – “to explain what the images mean, as if they don’t explain themselves, or as if viewers can’t be trusted to work the meaning out on their own. Indeed, the voice-over often seems to attribute a reduced meaning to the visuals; that is it denies them a density they might have by themselves” (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: p. 19). It is typical for the expository documentary style that the narrator speaks about or for other people. Some filmmakers see these voice-overs as “colonial, an enemy of the film, the voice of God” or even as “the (non-existent) view from somewhere” (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: p. 47).

As a countermovement and in the course of technical development in the 1950s and early 1960s the observational documentary was born. The optical soundtrack that ran along the picture was replaced with magnetic sound stock separated from the picture. This allowed filmmakers to cut and recut sound without affecting the picture. Sound could be laid over any part of the film and it became easy to lay people's words over the images as a voice-over. The result was a very different kind of documentary: formal interviews were avoided, commentary was felt to be reductive and restricting and images and their sounds were given more freedom. The aim was to record events in long synchronous takes, without directorial or editorial intervention, so that scenes would reveal or demonstrate the cultural basis of interpersonal behaviour. This documentary style is known as Direct Cinema. "Direct Cinema filmmakers tend to be relatively noninterventionist and self-effacing, at times aspiring to be the invisible flies on the wall...they seem to have assumed that what occurred while they were there is what would have occurred had they not been there" (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: p. 29-30).

Direct Cinema was and still is an attempt to give the filmed people a voice in order to create more authenticity. Many observational filmmakers today claim that they want a more "democratic style" in which the images and the people speak for themselves. These films are based on the assumption of the existence of objectivity. At least they try to provide the audience with an objective view on their subject matter by "letting the people speak for themselves".

However, it must be stated clearly that every film by somebody about somebody, or something is inevitably subjective. Selections of camera angles, lenses, film stock, scenes, interviews and how a film is edited are always the result of decisions made

by a human being and therefore personal and subjective. Objectivity is an illusion – if by objectivity one means that events are seen from no particular perspective. But subjectivity doesn't automatically decrease the significance or impact of a documentary. A documentary that acknowledges its limitations and its own perspective is more valuable than a film that pretends to be neutral, objective and all-embracing because it deals more honestly with its subject(s) or issue(s). In my opinion a film can't be neutral, objective and / or all-embracing. In pretending to make it so, one offers an inadequate image of documentary making (and filmmaking generally).

Another form of documentary is the interactive documentary which “arose from the...desire to make the filmmaker's perspective more evident. Interview styles and interventionist tactics arose, allowing the filmmaker to participate more actively in present events” (Nichols,1989: p. 33). All interactive documentaries by definition draw the filmed people and events into direct contact with the filmmaker. Authors like Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore play the role of mediator between the subject in the film and the audience. The content is based primarily on interviews, which draw out specific comments and responses from those who are filmed. The spectator can see what effect the interview is having on the interviewee. Unlike expository and observational documentaries, the power relations between filmmaker and those who are filmed are more apparent. Interactive documentaries are a very powerful instrument for filmmakers with investigative intentions but no more an assurance of authenticity or sincerity than any other style. Because of the persuasive powers of interactive documentaries, filmmakers sometimes tend to select only specific scenes and put them in a certain order to support or confirm their personal suspicion or speculation. Nevertheless, the interactive documentary makes the filmmakers'

presence more obvious and by doing that it admits to being subjective which is the basis for reflexivity.

## 2. REFLEXIVITY AND THE FILMMAKERS (OLD) NEW RESPONSIBILITIES

A film is a construction. A construction of the world is an interpretative and therefore subjective act of someone who has a certain cultural background with a particular ideology. Class, gender, race and point of view affect the way in which information will be conveyed. Filmmakers and other people who produce images always display their view of the world, whether they mean to or not. No matter how many people feel a need for an objective witness of reality, filmmaking cannot provide it. As most audiences still believe that documentary images are accurate representations of reality one must raise the question of where the filmmaker's responsibility to the audience lies.

Jay Ruby (2000) answers this question with his demand on filmmakers to be reflexive. That is, he reminds the audience of the interpretive and constructed nature of the documentary form. He believes that documentary filmmakers are being more ethical if their methods and techniques are revealed, if they admit that objectivity is an illusion and don't make this illusion an aim of their documentary. He writes that

the filmic illusion of reality is an extremely dangerous one, for it gives the people who control the image industry too much power. The majority of Americans, if not the majority of the world's population, receive information



about the outside world from the images produced by film, television and photography. If the lie that pictures always tell the truth is perpetuated, together with the lie that some images are objective witnesses to reality, then an industry that has the potential to symbolically recreate the world in its own image continues to wield far too much power... We should not let the rush of the marketplace destroy our responsibility to act intelligently. We must demystify these [the image makers'] technologies so that we can cultivate a more critical and sophisticated audience. (2000: p. 149)

Jay Ruby's ideal of a reflexive documentary provides the audience with essential knowledge about the producer (the identity of the filmmaker), the process (the means and methods that are used) and the product (the final film itself). Ruby also includes the viewer (knowledge about audience perception and in what context a film is being shown).

Although the idea of being reflexive is definitely not new in either written anthropology or filmed ethnography, it has failed to gain a sufficient influence on documentary filmmakers for it to be established as a genre. To remind the audience of the constructive and interpretative nature of images was and still is seen by some people as counterproductive to the nature of a film experience: that is, creating an illusion of a given reality. "Moreover, some people regard such revelation as self-indulgent, in that it turns the audience's attention away from the film and toward the filmmaker". (Ruby, 2000: p. 154) The revelation of producer and process is still often thought to be non-essential and even inappropriate. To reveal the producer is thought to be overly personal, subjective and even unscientific. To reveal the process is deemed untidy, ugly and confusing to an audience.

Reflexivity, however, goes back to Dziga Vertov's famous film *The Man with a Movie Camera* made in 1929. Vertov didn't just show a usual working day of ordinary people in Stalin's Russia. Throughout the film the audience sees the camera recording, the editor rearranging shots and people watching a film in the cinema. He wanted the audience to understand how film works and wished to make revolutionary films that intentionally taught audiences to see the world in a specific way, in Marxist terms. Although his intentions were debatable, Vertov was reflexive at least in terms of revealing the process. He wasn't concerned about revealing the producer, the filmmaker's identity.

Bill Nichols sees the reflexive documentary as a mode that "arose from a desire to make the conventions of representations themselves more apparent and to challenge the impression of reality which the other three modes normally conveyed unproblematically" (1989: p. 33). The French *Cinéma Vérité* of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin undoubtedly belongs to the reflexive documentary mode. It resulted from the 1960s as a counter-movement to the North American Direct Cinema (observational documentary style). In *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960, made during the Algerian War), perhaps the first reflexive sociological film, Rouch and Morin ask people on the streets of Paris if they are happy. The film shows the subjects in a theatre watching and criticising a first version of the film and eventually ends with the two filmmakers (in the frame) discussing the process of making the film. Thus the film foregrounds the filmmaking itself, the relationship between filmmaker and subjects as well as between filmmaker and spectator.

Although being reflexive seems to fill a gap that other styles tend to neglect, it has its own problems. Reflexive documentaries are often accused of intellectual élitism and even narcissism. Total attention to the producer creates autobiography rather than ethnography. In addition some interactive and *Vérité* filmmakers use the camera deliberately to provoke reactions but by doing so they convert “real people’s” responses into contrived performances. Life as it would have gone on without the camera is not a question that is even raised.

If a film is too focussed on its own formal construction and is primarily about the making of the film, the film itself becomes the object of the audience's attention -- then it may lose sight of the material world of which documentary tries to provide a record. Documentary filmmaking can easily become unethical if an ethnographic filmmaker uses the subject in the film to examine him- or herself. Sometimes when filmmakers speak in a first-person narration to indicate themselves as authors and to describe the stresses and strains they had to get through in order to make the film, the reflexiveness of these documentaries only serves to perpetuate the myths of the genre. That is, the audience's interest in these films is partially based on the assumed difficulties of the production and the heroic acts performed by the makers in the process of getting the footage. These films do not lead an audience to a so-called sophisticated understanding of film as communication. Ruby writes:

To be reflexive is not only to be self-conscious but to be sufficiently self-conscious to know what aspects of the self must be revealed to an audience to enable them to understand the process employed, as well as the resultant product, and to know how much revelation is purposive, intentional, and when it becomes narcissistic or accidentally revealing. This knowledge – that is,

knowing how much of the self it is necessary to reveal – is the most difficult aspect of being reflexive. When successfully mastered, it separates self-indulgence from revelation. (2000: p. 155)

### 3. CONCLUSIONS AND IDEAS FOR MY FINAL PRODUCT

The time is past when people believed that a journalist's primary ethical responsibility was to be objective. People intent on producing "National Geographic" voyeuristic pictures of tribal peoples now find themselves discussing permission with tribal lawyers.

I agree that documentary filmmakers must not appear to be neutral and therefore shouldn't try to provide the audience with an objective view. However, in my own experiences, some of the public still think that documentary filmmakers should strive to be objective. Therefore, as the author of my documentary about Mercy Mancini, I have the obligation to reveal a part of myself, the filming process and the documentary as a whole: that is, to be reflexive. Because I assume responsibility for whatever meaning exists in the image I need to make people aware of a point of view. There are many ways of reminding the audience of the filmmaking process. Some ethnographic filmmakers intentionally leave a tripod in the background of the frame or let the boom come into the frame. I personally think that there are more elegant ways of revelation and believe that overt methods aren't necessary for my documentary.

The target audience of my documentary is the German state TV system. Therefore I need to provide basic facts and arguments about sangomas and traditional healing methods that other documentaries made for the South African market might neglect and assume as common knowledge. I would like to convey this information, and information in general, mainly through an interactive dialogue with the protagonist Mercy Mancini and using my voice as a first-person narrator throughout the film. That means that the film is about Mercy and traditional healing methods but has the confrontation of two cultures as a subtext. For example: instead of filming Mercy consulting a client and later laying her voice over the images, I would like to show her the camera-edited footage on TV while we are having a conversation about the session and traditional healing which will be filmed (I'm in the frame, sitting next to her). By doing so I hope to gain two effects: namely, to remind the audience of the subjective nature of documentaries and to provide a kind of sincerity in that Mercy and I are talking about the same images that the audience sees.

I understand the interaction between Mercy and myself always as a "live-situation", especially at the Durban multi-market when I'll ask her to explain the meanings of some of the ingredients and confront her with terrible stories about traditional healers that can be found in newspapers and on TV.

In addition, I'd like to give her a second camera for the duration of the filming. That means she can film whatever she wants to at any time, in particular when we're traveling from her current home, Pretoria, to Durban and eventually to the place where she was born, a small village near Flagstaff in the Transkei. This footage may contain her spontaneous comments while filming herself or the crew, personal filmic impressions of our trip, etc. I would also like to encourage Mercy to film herself every

evening reflecting on the day, the collaboration with me / the team and the overall enterprise, with the request that she be absolutely honest. I will do likewise.

Through the first-person narration I hope to convey my knowledge about sangomas and traditional healing in order to question and extend it in an interactive dialogue with Mercy. Besides, it is an opportunity to comment on the filming process and to reveal necessary information about me, my approach to the documentary and my reasons for choosing these particular methods.

I'm aware that this won't be the easiest way of making this documentary and I don't claim my approach to be the solution for dealing with indigenous people in documentaries. I'm also aware that the empowerment of the subject is more illusionary than actual as the editorial control still remains in the filmmaker's hands. But it is, for me, an approach that ethically makes me feel more comfortable as someone with a totally different cultural background to Mercy's and seems to be at least worth trying.

None of eight documentaries I've seen about sangomas and South African traditional healing methods in the course of my research came close to a reflexive documentary. They were all shown on SABC and e.tv in the last four years. Four of them are made in an observational style without a narrator: only the subjects speak in interviews and voice-overs. Two of them are expository documentaries with a third-person narration plus interviews and the other two are a combination of both speaking subjects and third-person narrator, equally weighted.

## 4 TAKING A LOOK BACK

### 4.1 PRE-PRODUCTION

When I watched Jack Lewis' footage of Mercy Mancini at his production company Idol Pictures in Muizenberg in March 2003 I knew that my search for the protagonist of my film would have an early end. Jack, did a TV insert for e.tv of 6 minutes about a consultation with a traditional healer: Mercy Mancini. Mercy's warm and natural presence on screen impressed me from the beginning as well as her striking storytelling abilities. In addition she seemed to be comfortable in front of the camera and to be familiar with the processes of filming. I was aware that it is absolutely vital to find a sympathetic and convincing protagonist. But I also knew from my work in Germany that even if you find somebody who seems to be the perfect subject, you never know how this person will come across when the camera is rolling until you actually film that person, unpleasant surprises included. Although it was clear to me that I wanted to do this film with Mercy I met other traditional healers in the next few weeks. Looking back, I probably contacted them in order to clear my conscience and to strengthen and confirm my feeling that I had found somebody special, Mercy.

#### 4.1.1 FINDING MERCY Part 1

At the beginning I tried to get Mercy Mancini's number from the directory enquiry. A futile attempt. Eventually I got hold of Mercy's new number through approximately 15 other people. Jack told me that she used to work for the Department of Health (DOH) at the time he was filming with her. Unfortunately she wasn't working there anymore but a woman at the DOH knew somebody who knew a person who had seen her

recently. Three weeks, R 500 airtime and a lot of unreturned phone calls later I spoke to Mercy for the first time. She had only a cell phone. It was a great relief to hear that she was interested in participating in my film.

About eight weeks later I went to Pretoria to meet her at her office. At this time she began working for "Prometra", an organisation that supports traditional healing and represents sangomas in Africa. She showed me her office and afterwards we went to the place where she used to live and consult patients. We talked for more than four hours and at the end we committed ourselves to the project. She turned out to be an intelligent, lovely and warm-hearted woman with an incredibly interesting life story. On my way back I had a big smile on my face.

We stayed in contact the whole year. She sent me information about herself, such as her CV, articles and an audio tape on which she explained the dreams she had when she was called to become a sangoma. In addition she gave me books and photographs which I used for my webpage about the film.

#### 4.1.2 FINDING MERCY Part 2

Two months before the filming I began to get my crew together. But new in the country, without any connections and with little (i.e. no) money, I was struggling. Eventually I found a camerawoman in Johannesburg who had graduated at AFDA a year before, specialising in camerawork. The soundman came from Cape Town. I booked a car, planned the trip carefully and felt well prepared for our journey. Initially



I had wanted to shoot at the Durban multi-market but due to time constraints I changed my mind, opting instead for the multi-market in Johannesburg.

Three weeks before the shoot the contact with Mercy suddenly cut off. Only her mailbox was activated on her cell phone. She wasn't working for Prometra anymore because they closed their offices in South Africa. I tried not to worry too much but after several days without getting hold of her I became nervous. Mercy had been very reliable throughout the whole year. There was no reason to panic. I thought that she had possibly gone to her home village in the Transkei and there might be no reception there. On the other hand, it was very unusual for her not to return my calls.

One week before our departure for Johannesburg I still hadn't reached her. When I phoned Jack and explained to him the situation he eventually got hold of another telephone number of a friend of Mercy who eventually gave me Mercy's new number. It turned out that Mercy's cell phone had been stolen and my number was saved only on that stolen phone. The new number was her daughter's cell phone number. Mercy had moved from Pretoria to Johannesburg and gave me her new address.

#### 4.1.3 FINDING MERCY Part 3

Two days later the contact cut off again!

Eventually I drove together with the soundman from Cape Town to Johannesburg and decided not to tell him about the latest news. It became apparent that this was the better choice because he was worried enough anyway. He didn't drive faster than 95 kilometers per hour (Johannesburg is about 1400 Kilometers away) and refused to drive at night.

We arrived at about 1 pm on the day before the shoot in Jo'burg. After looking for accommodation we met the camerawoman and I now told both of them about my difficulty in reaching Mercy. The three of us drove to the address Mercy had given me. I discovered that she didn't live in the best area of Johannesburg. It was surprising because her former place in Pretoria was so much nicer. Later Mercy told me that she was not feeling comfortable in her new house but after Prometra closed their South African offices she had experienced financial difficulties. It was a big, run-down house with broken windows. A few people were standing in front of the entrance. My team locked itself in the car and I went to the fifth floor of the house. The way the people were looking at me made me feel uncomfortable. (In the last weeks and months I had read, thought and discussed so much about representing "the other", about how to deal with people who are different to me. Now at this house it felt like I was "the other". The people looked at me as if I was an "exotic other" they had never seen before. It was a very uncomfortable feeling.) The staircases and corridors were dirty and an unfamiliar smell filled the whole house. I knocked at Mercy's door and a young girl opened. It was Mercy's grandchild. She told me that Mercy was at the multi-market and offered to take me there. We found Mercy wandering in the market, talking to people. She appeared to be in a good mood. The time seemed to stand still when I saw her and I enjoyed the happy feeling of finally finding her. It was only the second time that we had met but it was a very warm welcoming. Mercy told me that her daughter had left her the cell phone but had taken the charger with her accidentally. So it wasn't working. I didn't care anymore. We made an appointment for 10 am the next morning to film her consulting a patient.

## 4.2 PRODUCTION

### 4.2.1 DAY 1 CONSULTATION

Although the filming conditions were anything but optimal it turned out to be a very uncomplicated collaboration between Mercy and myself. Her apartment was one small room and it got hot very easily with five people in it, especially after twelve when it received direct sunshine. The fact that the building was very close to a highway made it impossible to open the window during the shooting. Besides that, the children playing, shouting loudly in the house made the sound-recording conditions difficult.

Mercy and her patient repeated every part of the consultation several times for the camera with great patience. She immediately understood the issue of continuity and almost always integrated my question in her answer after my asking her to do this only once. After a while I laid my sheet of paper with all the questions aside and asked her things which instinctively interested me.

The day before I had the feeling that my team might have regretted doing this film. But today it took just half an hour before I felt that Mercy had captured them completely with her charm. I was very happy about this because I knew that we needed a harmonious and respectful relationship in order to make this film.

I carefully kept an eye on the verbal and non-verbal interaction between Mercy and my team because I wanted Mercy to feel absolutely comfortable.

#### 4.2.2 DAY 2 MUTI-MARKET

I felt very sick on this day with a high temperature, cold sweat and an aching stomach. Mercy told me to drink a lot of juice and water which I did.

After Mercy and I discussed what we both thought was important to film we began shooting. For some reason the market was quite empty and we couldn't film everything we wanted. Besides that, I felt unconfident about my selection of shots: wide shots, two close shots on our faces and cutaways on the things we were talking about. In addition the weather conditions changed every ten minutes from cloudy to sunny and back.

During the second half of the day we filmed Mercy walking in Jo'burg and took shots of the city without her. I was completely fascinated by the number of shooting locations in Johannesburg. I thought to myself that I could easily shoot there for three weeks without getting bored at all. Unfortunately it was cloudy the whole afternoon. Back in the hotel room in the evening, I had a look at the footage of the last two days. I was totally exhausted and what I saw didn't contribute to my recovery. The material of the muti-market looked staged, uninspired and showed tremendous differences in terms of brightness, contrast and colour saturation. The shots of Jo'burg were actually nice but quite grey and not as exciting as they could have been because of the weather. The footage of the consultation was largely acceptable.

Feeling sick and completely unsatisfied with what we had shot on this day I changed the plan and postponed the trip to the Transkei for one day and decided to do the muti-market and the shots of Jo'burg again the following day. I informed everybody, and then the camerawoman told me that she had a lucrative job for the next three

days. But she promised to bring another woman who would take over from her and travel with us to the Transkei. When we were back in Jo'burg she would join our shoot again. Although it was disappointing I accepted the situation. I hardly used a shot from this day later in the film.

#### 4.2.3 DAY 3 MUTI-MARKET (Part 2)

The next morning I felt a bit better and we picked Mercy up to go to the market again. I apologised for doing everything again and Mercy was sympathetic. It became apparent that it was worth going back.

A simplified shooting concept -- a decision to shoot our conversation in one shot with me slightly in the frame -- made our interaction much more free and spontaneous. Besides that, it seemed to suit the whole concept of honesty and respect for Mercy much better as I thought that one shot is not as manipulative as a sequence with certain cuts. I know that one gives a single shot a distinct meaning in a film as well but at the location at this time it felt more organic and honest to me.

I got excited by all the unfamiliar barks and roars around us and especially by all the animal parts. During the shooting of our conversations I placed my feet far away from each other, and bent my knees, so that I was smaller and Mercy didn't look up to me too much in the frame. I am sure that it must have looked amusing to others. In addition I smiled at Mercy almost every time when she finished her explanation in order to evoke her striking smile. I was aware that this was manipulative but how the interviewee reacts always depends on the response of the interviewer and their

relationship. I knew her smiling, I had seen it a lot of times before and I wanted the audience of my film to see her charming smile in order to feel nearly as close to her as I did. In addition it was clear to me that it would be very important for my film that the audience should like Mercy. I couldn't resist the temptation, not only because of the success I wanted my film to be, but also because I wanted to represent Mercy as positively and likeably as possible.

The crew and myself were the only people with white skin at the market. Everybody knew Mercy and she enjoyed a very good reputation. It was great fun this day and we shot at the market until about three o'clock in the afternoon. Later we went to film some shots of the city without Mercy. The footage of the market this day looked much better than the first time. Although I was not a hundred percent satisfied with some of the framing at the market, I knew that we had to carry on in order to get everything done in the next few days. The shots of Johannesburg looked amazing!

#### 4.2.4 DAY 4 TRAVEL TO TRANSKEI AND REGISTRATION

Now it was time to give Mercy our second camera. It would not have made sense before because we were too busy with the actual shoot. I only told Mercy now about the camera in order to get her "spontaneous" response because I wanted the scene to look as natural and unstaged as possible. The strategy I used served a vision that I had in my mind -- a degree of manipulation which is acceptable for me in this situation.

We filmed one last shot in the multi-market which we had forgotten the previous day and started off in the direction of the Transkei. Our car was packed with equipment and personal bags.

We drove for about 10 hours. Most of the time Mercy and I were sitting in the back talking. I explained to her the basic features of the camera and our conversation became very personal, as much from her side as mine. During this day I really felt that Mercy and I had found a connection beyond our documentary. There was a very pleasant combination of interest, trust and respect. I was fascinated by how Mercy combined the modern and the traditional in herself and how she struggled sometimes to build a bridge across. We travelled through the most beautiful landscape and stopped several times in order to film before we eventually reached Flagstaff. An hour later at about 10:30 pm we arrived at our final destination - Hlwahlwazi.

We prepared the gear ten minutes before we arrived in order to be ready to film as Mercy got out of the car. It almost worked out. When we got out of the car and the people welcomed Mercy (and us) my soundman tripped and fell down. It took half an hour before we could record sound again properly. In the meantime we filmed with the on-board microphone.

I felt extremely glad and grateful to be given the opportunity to be there. The first two hours felt like 15 minutes. The people, the dancing, the singing and the whole ceremony felt so connected to earth. Mercy lead the registration as the supervisor of the student. Being a part of this amazing traditional ritual was one of the greatest things I have ever experienced and it completely filled my heart with joy. All my work from the last weeks and months seemed now to be fulfilling and complete.

During the ceremony I was always torn between two desires. On the one hand, I wanted to film this fascinating event with the best shots we could get. On the other hand, I carefully kept an eye on not disturbing the ceremony. This turned out to be a very thin line. At this point I want to thank the (second) camerawoman who went with us. Obviously things just happened once during the registration. There was no way to repeat anything for the camera. So either we got the parts of the ceremony we wanted or not and I think that she did a very good job.

I have seen many documentaries about sangomas and traditional healing in the course of my research. But watching something on TV and being there when it happens are completely different experiences. At one point I stepped back and thought to myself that, hopefully, I would convey as much as possible of the feeling of being here.

At about half past two we were exhausted and wanted to drive to our hotel in Flagstaff. But Mercy told us that it might be too dangerous to drive by ourselves at night for even here in this rural area many people get robbed. So Mercy offered us her house. An offer which we gratefully accepted. I must have fallen asleep within seconds.



#### 4.2.5 DAY 5 MERCY'S HOME VILLAGE

At about half past nine in the morning we awoke. A cockerel, standing on my sleeping bag, was crying loudly. It felt like a bad comedy but nevertheless we were laughing. I went outside and, for the first time, in daylight, I saw the place where everything had happened. The campfire was still burning.

We found an exhausted but still charming Mercy when we filmed the interview at the smoking campfire. I decided not to film any reaction shots of me because it felt inappropriate. Although we could have easily done it I didn't want to give myself the opportunity in the edit. It just didn't feel right. I wanted all the attention to be on her.

It was a beautiful day and, because of the fact that Mercy needed to get some sleep, we drove around the area by ourselves and filmed some shots of the landscape.

We came back to Mercy's home village at about three o'clock in the afternoon and went to the same place where she at the age of 18 went to fetch water for the family, and was abducted by two men, one of whom later became her husband.

As soon as we began talking about her family and her marriage she got very emotional and fragile and allowed me to experience a new vulnerable side to her.

This vulnerability surprised me because up until this moment she had seemed to be so self-possessed.

In the evening we decided to stay in the only (very expensive) hotel in Flagstaff because Mercy and the people at her village needed their place to sleep.

#### 4.2.6 DAY 6 TRAVEL BACK TO JOHANNESBURG

I got up very early on this morning in order to film some shots by myself -- shots of the Transkei that I thought we still needed after I had watched the footage the previous evening.

Later we fetched Mercy and drove back to Jo'burg. On our way we recorded the conversation in the car. The recording turned out to be anything but simple. I knew that I probably would not get the best picture and sound quality but nevertheless it seemed right to me to film it in the car because it evoked the feeling and structure of the film: that this was a journey and a coming back.

We rearranged all the luggage which would have been in the frame and put it next to Mercy and me which meant that we could not move at all. The soundman was driving while listening to the sound on the headphones and the camerawoman was filming backwards from the passenger seat. I directed the microphone alternately to Mercy and myself during the conversation. It was very hot in the car and we needed to film it two or three times until we were reasonably happy with what we got. It was the last very demanding thing for all of us during this shoot.

We got to Johannesburg at about 10 o'clock in the evening.

#### 4.2.7 DAY 7 JOHANNESBURG / TRIP BACK TO CAPE TOWN

Back in Johannesburg and together with our first camerawoman again, we managed to get on top of the SABC building in order to film some nice shots of the city.

Later we picked Mercy up to film her walking in Johannesburg again. We needed to do it one more time because the former shots of her in a cloudy Johannesburg didn't match the sunny shots of the city we did before we went to the Transkei -- and because it looks nicer anyway on a beautiful day. I promised that these would be the last shots with her; however, Mercy seemed not to be bothered at all.

At about 2 pm we said goodbye to Mercy and I thanked her for an absolutely fantastic trip (and this we filmed as well). Afterwards the soundman and I started off in the direction of Cape Town where we arrived at midday the next day.

#### 4.3 POST-PRODUCTION

Although I felt very happy with some parts of the material and reasonably satisfied with a lot of the footage, it was an exciting moment to watch the tapes not only on the small LCD monitor of the camera but also on a bigger TV screen.

I knew that there was still a lot of work to be done and gave myself a few days off to recover and to gain some distance from the film material. (As if that was likely.)

The rough structure of the film was clear from the beginning: From Johannesburg to Mercy in the city, past the consultation and the muti-market to the Transkei and back.

Exactly how we filmed it. I had chosen this structure as I saw the film as a journey: a journey for the audience and for Mercy and me. The audience should get to know Mercy the same way I did during our trip: from more informal to more intimate. They should come with us on the journey and witness how the the relationship between Mercy and me developed.

To select and to structure the parts themselves turned out at times to be a great challenge. I had 18 tapes of footage, each tape consisting of forty minutes.

Looking back I caught myself being hesitant in the editing suite as to whether or not I should show myself in the film and considered writing a less personal but more informative narration.

I didn't want to draw any attention away from Mercy. But after showing several versions to other filmmakers and friends and in the discussions that followed I realised that I had to bring more of myself into the film. In doing so I developed an important element of the film which is the relationship between Mercy and myself. I integrated myself attending the registration in the hut, extended the interactive dialogue scenes that show the development of our relationship and wrote a less formal, more personal narration.

For example, at the muti-market when Mercy told me that the African potato helps people who are suffering from AIDS, I repeated my question because I wanted to make sure that I understood her correctly. I intentionally left this scene with my second question in the film to show that I couldn't believe what she told me the first time.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This is the first time that I have appeared in a film of mine and used a first-person narration. When and to what extent I should reveal my identity in the film was a great challenge for me. Undoubtedly I was lucky to find Mercy Mancini as my protagonist. Although I went through a lot of obstacles, the collaboration between Mercy and me was always uncomplicated, inspiring and full of trust, which made the whole process of filming very pleasant and exciting at all times.

In dealing with cross-cultural filmmaking and questions about representing and misrepresenting the other I not only improved my awareness of how to deal with people from different backgrounds in my films. The experience also taught me how to deal with people of "my" culture as, at the end of the day, the question is one of representing people with more awareness and sensitivity, regardless of where they come from.

## 6. NARRATION IN FILM

This is Johannesburg, money capital of the old and the new South Africa, home for more than 3 million people and the place where a special journey began.

I was born and raised in Frankfurt, Germany. And I was never restricted in my own country by laws as to when and where I could or could not go. But for the majority of South Africans this was the reality until 1994 when Nelson Mandela was elected as the first democratic president.

This is Mercy Manci. She lives and works in Johannesburg as a sangoma, a traditional healer. She has been practicing for more than 20 years. She has also worked for the Department of Health as a mediator between the modern and the traditional health sectors.

When I met Mercy a year ago I was completely taken by her from the first moment. We come from totally different (cultural) backgrounds. However, she made her world accessible to me immediately.

A fascinating world of strong beliefs in spirits and ancestors. A world where the modern and the traditional meet, mix, collide and work together in extraordinary ways.

It may sound paradoxical but a lot of the indigenous South African tradition has been strongly maintained due to the racist Apartheid regime. Some areas of the country

today still remain largely uninterfered with by white or western-orientated people. Mercy originally comes from such an area, called Transkei.

According to estimates, more than 80 percent of the indigenous population regularly visit a traditional healer. They function in effect as physical doctors and mental consultants.

Although I knew that sangomas throw bones and connect with the ancestors my knowledge about their healing methods itself was quite limited. So I was glad when Mercy invited me to take part in a consultation and afterwards she explained to me what she had done.

(CONSULTATION AT MERCY'S HOUSE)

The next day Mercy showed me the muti-market in Johannesburg. A place where traditional healers buy their medicine called muti. This used to be the place and this is the newly arranged market built and supported by the government. The place was well organized and every stand was registered with a certain number at a particular place. However, when Mercy showed me around I saw things I didn't expect to find in a market. There were all sorts of animal parts. Skulls, feet, skeletons, hands...

(MUTI-MARKET)

Although animals play an important role in traditional healing methods, most of the available goods are barks and roots. Salesmen skillfully cut and prepare them. Every bark and every root has a particular purpose.

(MUTI-MARKET)

The next day we picked Mercy up and before we drove to her home village in the Transkei, I gave her our second camera.

Her home village is in a rural area near Flagstaff, a small town in the heart of the Transkei and is called (I hope I am pronouncing it correctly) Hlwahlwazi. It is almost 900 kilometers away from Johannesburg and it took a whole day to get there. When we arrived we were already expected. Mercy had to introduce a future traditional healer to the world of the ancestors. After the welcoming outside we went into a hut where the so-called registration, the beginning of a two-year-training, began. It didn't take long before I realized that my (German) understanding of the word registration was altogether something else.

Mercy told me that it is all about praising and communicating with the ancestors. Singing, dancing and playing the drums are essential elements besides sacrificing a chicken and other rituals in order to evoke the ancestors -- to draw the energy from them to the people and back. This is the student who got called to become a sangoma, it is her registration. A few drops of the chicken's blood are put into a pot with water which must be fetched from the river at 3:00 am on the same day.



Together with the powder of particular roots and barks it becomes a special medicine whose foam purifies the body and clears and stabilizes the student's mind. White soil that can only be found and dug out at certain places also helps the student to let the communication flow. As well as inhaling the incense.

Mercy told me later that after the official registration one could see that the student felt much more confident at her first dance. She felt accepted by the ancestors. During her training other traditional healers will show the student how to connect with the ancestors and how to dance, to sing and to praise them properly. They will also explain to her the uses of the traditional medicines and how and where to obtain what medicine. We went to sleep at about half past two but we still heard the drums outside for a very long time.

(INTERVIEW AT MERCY'S HOME VILLAGE)

This is what Mercy filmed in her home village.

(MERCY'S FOOTAGE)

Later that day Mercy showed me a place where she used to fetch water. There she told me about her family.

(INTERVIEW AT THE PLACE WHERE SHE USED TO FETCH WATER)

After a while Mercy began studying typing without her husband's knowledge and took contraception secretly. Because of the fact that she wasn't falling pregnant anymore, her husband forced her to leave. In 1980 Mercy left her five-year-old child with her husband, went to Pretoria and started working as a secretary. Six years later she followed her calling and became a sangoma. Later her child followed her to Pretoria. I had heard some awful stories about traditional healers in the South African media, suggesting that there were amongst them some who abused their powers. So I still needed to ask her certain things on our way back. For instance: Do traditional healers make use human body parts in their prescription?

(INTERVIEW IN THE CAR)

THE END

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