

“The camera tends to lie and the audience tends to believe”. Some implications of the use of film in ethnographic research: the case of the European research project *TRESEGY*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues related to the use of film in social science research. A documentary made within *TRESEGY*, a three year EU-funded research project, is the basis of this paper. *TRESEGY* focused on the experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere among second generation migrated European teenagers. The final documentary was made by two film crews from two different universities that divided among themselves nine European cities where filming took place. Issues of the negotiation of meaning involved in the different stages of film-making, between a) the researchers consortium and the filmmakers b) the youths filmed and the filmmakers/researchers from each terrain are discussed.

KEYWORDS: social sciences; documentary; collective filmmaking; methodology.

RESUMO

O artigo trabalha questões relacionadas com o uso do filme na investigação em ciências sociais. Um documentário feito no âmbito do projecto *TRESEGY*, projecto financiado pela EU, é a base deste artigo. *TRESEGY* focalizou questões de inclusão e exclusão na esfera pública de jovens europeus de ascendência imigrante. O documentário final foi realizado por duas equipas diferentes de duas universidades diferentes que dividiram entre si as nove cidades a filmar. São apresentadas e discutidas questões de negociação de sentido envolvidas nos vários estádios da produção entre a) consórcio de investigadores e realizadores e b) entre os jovens filmados e os investigadores de cada terreno/cidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ciencias sociais; documentário; realização coletiva; metodologia.

1. The research project

This paper refers to a recently concluded FP6 funded project called *TRESEGY* (Transnational Research on Second Generation Youth). *TRESEGY* started in summer 2006 and lasted for three years. The overall project objective was to investigate the experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere among second generation immigrant descent teenagers in nine European cities within six European countries. As a part of the project commitment to the funding body (the European Commission) a video documentary was set as one of the main forms of knowledge production and dissemination. Despite the visual dimension being nowadays considered to be central in communication processes, its implementation within an international

scientific and EC funded project was new, innovative and therefore quite unexplored. The following paper tries to analyze and reflect on two main aspects and implications of using the video medium in such a context: first, the significance and extent of video as a form of scientific knowledge production and, second, the implicit impact of video production over the relation between researchers and informants and ensuing ways of negotiating forms of meaning over experiences.

Due to both its positioning within the funding scheme in FP6¹ and the nature of the investigated

¹ STREP (Specific Targeted Research Project) based upon a nar-

topic, TRESEGY project employed a rather new and innovative approach and research design to explore the emerging and the coming of age of second generation immigrant ascendancy youth as an influential, active, and multi-faced social category in Europe. By investigating these social phenomena in an *empirical, qualitative, emic* and *bottom-up* oriented perspective, the project aimed at sketching social inclusion and exclusion processes in an unchallenged dimension: the one that takes the youths as potential actors of social change.

To reach this goal TRESEGY research design employed a multi-layered approach centered on a *gestalt*-like strategy where current available quantitative and general qualitative data functioned as background reference to the empiric qualitative investigation based on an ethnographic model. Thus, the main core of the research activities was based on nine ethnographies that adopted different methods according to each local context specificity. Within this framework, the production of a feature documentary – called *In-Between – Nine takes on the European scene* – functioned as a shared “output” of the project. The choice to employ film as one of the main project’s deliverables had a double-sided justification and implication. First of all the specific nature and content of the project’s topic – tracing the informants’ experiences of inclusion and exclusion rather than inclusion/exclusion themselves as over-imposed social categories – called for a challenging opportunity to produce a form of “text” that would be able to represent in a more life-like manner the “experiential and constructive” side of the research. Second, the investigated social group – largely composed of immigrant descent youths – presented itself as more attracted to and interested in visual-based knowledge and production of meaning. Finally and taking into consideration the side of the project addressees, who were specified in the financing contract and were constituted by a very broad audience, the visual approach emerged as a more accessible way to represent and tell about the immigrant descent second generation youths’ stories on social inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere.

Yet, the choice to use visual methods was largely linked to the intrinsic nature and spirit that animated the project since its beginning. Therefore, a short epistemological account on TRESEGY is necessary to elucidate the connection between the project’s main standpoints and the endorsed visual methodology. Primarily, the newly emerging point is not related to what TRESEGY aims to study, but more importantly to how it wants to produce forms of knowledge about inclusion and exclusion among youths of immigrant descent at local, national and transnational level. Previous research on immigrants’ participation in society has predominantly been produced from a nation-state hegemonic perspective – thus with an *ethic* approach. Most of the research in the area of migration studies

that have focused upon youths has been quantitative (see EFFNATIS and TIES research projects at the EU level, and INED and IARD reports at the national level)². Despite their prominent role in the European public and scientific discourse, the concepts of social inclusion/exclusion and marginalization are without a precise agreed-upon content (Raaum et al. 2005). At European level an EC technical committee³ has approached the problem by defining and measuring social exclusion upon ten primary indicators. But are these measures or indicators capable of grasping the intimately relational, dynamic, negotiated context process at play when the social actors are taken as non-passive entities?

Thus, there was a real need to understand social exclusion/inclusion via a dynamic perspective rather than via a static one. On the one hand the so-called “excluded population” did not constitute a homogenous and stable group that could be easily characterized, being instead composed by very different individuals undergoing a disintegration process, which is in essence of a dynamic nature (EU Commission 1998). On the other hand, this same population was composed by a universe of personal and collective histories that might express outstandingly interesting – and potentially heuristically productive – experiences of inclusion and exclusion that no quantitative data (and even some qualitative data series) might ever account for.

If we assume the “experience of social exclusion/inclusion” as a key notion, we consequently accept the idea that these social phenomena are profoundly relational and very difficult to be defined and contained within over-imposed categories and taxonomies. Therefore “relational”, here, means that an emerging construction of inclusion and exclusion in society is both the result of a contrastive and contestive dynamic process. It is shaped around a power-based and social control logic in the receiving societies, and through a dialogic process of social identification through which individuals behave as active, proactive and non-passive social actors. In other words, the subjective and experiential dimension of social inclusion/exclusion as social phenomena is thus underlined.

2. The Film

2.1. The nature of film and its role as one of ethnography’s methodological tools

Film is not objective. Film objectifies⁴. Or to put it in

² EFFNATIS. See: <http://www.efms.uni-bamberg.de/prineffe.htm>; TIES. See: <http://www.tiesproject.eu/content/blogcategory/92/157/lang,en>;

INED (France). See http://www.ined.fr/fr/institut/parteneriats/europe/ties_rtn/;

IARD (Italy). See IARD (2007).

³ See the 2001 Social Protection Committee report available at: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/docs/social_protection_committee/laeken_list.pdf.

⁴ Film is not objective in terms of its qualities as a final pro-

simpler and provocative terms: *the camera tends to lie, and the audience tends to believe*. According to Arendt, in Western thought “knowing” has always been closely associated with “seeing” (quoted in Urry, 1999, p. 36), a stance that for Sontag (1979) bears on photography constituting it as a form of knowledge of the world. What is argued here is not only that the stances argued for by Sontag (1979) and Barthes (2000) for photography can and must be extended to film, but also that in today’s highly image-mediated late-modernity, visual-based forms of representing reality are seen not just as a form of knowledge but as *the* form of knowledge.

The effort that social researchers, namely anthropologists, dedicated to filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s was made in the sentimental and touching belief that through film they would be liberated from the subjectivity of their field notes⁵. The present day reality in terms of reflection on the role of film in social research as a medium that produces knowledge, i.e., a medium that represents social worlds is no longer that naïf⁶. Film, as photography, has the tendency to look plausible, real, that is, to look truthful. Thus the use of film-based methodologies in ethnographic work should always be approached with both its advantages and its limitations in mind. As far back as the early 1980s, Jarvie (1983) discussed extensively the nature of ethnographic film and its limitations in terms of the potential contributions to its use in anthropological research. He also discussed the nature of film and its ability in supplying adequate discussion of social structures. Thus it is important to stress that in visual-based methodologies production of knowledge – and strongly so in the film *In Between* – there is a valuable representation of what Bateson (1958) used to define as “*ethos*” in complementary relation to “*eidos*”. Actually, in some aspects, TRESEGY offered the opportunity to explore experiences of inclusion and exclusion both in *eidos* and *ethos* perspectives (assuming that, while performing, social actors do not distinguish actions based on *ethos* and *eidos* dimensions, being the researchers the ones who use such categories and distinctions, making it, in some way, both a factual and fictional distinction). In fact, film is not text and does not pretend to cover the same areas of observation and analysis. It has an originality of its own, and one would be tempted to say that whenever the fieldworker uses the camera in place of his pen he is doing bad ethnographic film (Balikci 1983).

A film, just as a photograph, is always a gaze over a reality. In his seminal work on the nature of photography (taken as photograph, thus as an object and not as a practice), Roland Barthes (2000 [1980]) dwells mostly on the power of the photographic image in the eye of the beholder. Barthes ascribes the power of the photograph to the nature of the straightforward physics

phenomena that is at its base: the ability of the light emanated from the object to impress the photographic film. This umbilical relation between the real being photographed and the photographic print is one of the reasons for the deceptively perceived straight-forward nature of the photographic image as directly reflecting the real, when, in fact, it is always *representing* the real being photographed. Representation is about knowledge of the world and the constitution of the latter as a signifying reality, and thus it is also about power. The politics of representation is concerned with questions of alignment and identification, with points of view and perspectives. According to Watney (1986, p. 187) the importance of a “politics of representation is that it refuses to regard cultural practices as merely reflective of, as subservient to other political struggles taking place in the non-textual”. However, film, like photography, through both the mechanical nature of the image being produced and the sheer knowledge-impact of the image on the viewer (who tends to think that the knowledge he or she is acquiring is non-mediated) has the tendency to not only present itself as “truthful”, that is, has the tendency not only to make forget the form chosen to depict something (the rhetoric of the image), as it has also the tendency to diminish the importance of what it ignores⁷. University degrees in the social sciences, when approaching the issue of film-based methodology might be effective in the teaching of film strategies and techniques, but they still have a long way to go in terms of the theoretical principles underlying ethnographic film. The great challenge to be met in the use of film in ethnography is on how to make compatible the two (often) rival systems of science and of art. Many social scientists still feel uncomfortable in following Luc de Heusch’s (1962) advice on ethnographers becoming more familiar with cinematographic theory and abandon the notion that the camera simply depicts reality.

2.2. The filming of *In Between*

It was with the unavoidable centrality of the issues referred to in the last section of this paper that TRESEGY’s documentary filmmaking took place. This filmmaking had some specificities that shall be presented next.

The first specificity is the fact that the film was going to be a collaborative work. One can argue that in the filming of the real, i.e., in documentary filmmaking (if not in all filmmaking, fiction included) the final work is always a collaborative piece of work. This collaborative nature of film is perhaps felt as being more so within the context of anthropological or ethnographic filming because the very co-participated nature of the

duct. Film objectifies in as much as it exercises an influence over its viewers.

⁵ See, for instance, Mead (2003).

⁶ See, for instance, Loizos (1993).

⁷ Moving into the specific realm of filmmaking, the viewing of Dziga Vertov’s 1929 masterful thesis-film *Man with a Movie Camera* should make clear to anyone watching it how in fact filmmaking is all about the construction of a gaze through the camera that works as an orthopedic device over the film audience’s sight.

anthropological/ethnographic fieldwork – a reality made explicit by the so-called postmodern writings in anthropology in the 1980s⁸ – inevitably impinges itself on the filmmaking activity. However, the collaborative nature of TRESEGY's documentary resulted from additional factors other than just the very nature of anthropological/ethnographic fieldwork with its very particular relation between social researchers and subjects being researched. From the very outset of TRESEGY it was jointly decided that there were going to be two film crews in charge of the filmmaking process (Porto and Genoa). Thus, there would be two directors, and also, possibly, two (conflicting or converging) views on how to go about making this film. The nine sites that were selected to make part of the project were assigned to each of the two film teams according to geographical proximity in order to scale down the production costs⁹. It should be added that the two film crews did not know each other before the actual beginning of the project. In addition to this particular situation, since the project involved nine sites, and thus nine research teams, of which the two film crews were only familiar with one site each (their own site, that is Porto and Genoa), this implied that both teams had to get to know the specificity of all the remaining seven terrains so as to be able to, jointly and in cooperation with each local research team, come to a decision on story lines, formats, approaches, etc. (and styles of filming are here being left out...). It should also be underlined that the action of the film directors was mediated by each local research team, in as much as these local teams offered logistic and scientific support to the film crew, and therefore in great measure both *oriented* and *constrained* the filming. In fact, each local research team acted as gatekeeper, thus determining dramatically the crew's freedom of action by orientating access to some parts of the terrain context and to some informants, leaving others out. This resulted in specific political implications in the films produced in each terrain. It should be here underlined that this specific aspect is not seen as negative, but only as yet another element that has to be taken into consideration in this specific experience of filmmaking (and in any other, although in different degrees or forms). This highly collaborative nature of *In Between's* filmmaking process is a very unusual situation if one considers: a) the nature and the tradition of anthropological fieldwork, that is, its configuration as a highly individual experience (very seldom do we find anthropological research carried out by teams), as well as b) the nature of filming itself, also a highly individual work, not because it is a single-person form of working – quite the

opposite: in film very seldom do we have a one-person film crew – but because it is an art form, and as such it is usually the result of an individual vision (although the final credits of any film might list an seemingly endless number of people who have worked in it, the film is always a work that belongs in artistic and authorship terms to its director).

The collaborative nature of the work expressed above was thus a challenge for the filmmaking. Another challenge was the very nature of the research to be carried out within the three years of the project. If one of the obligations in any organized form of filming is to have first an outline and then an actual script, in *In Between's* case this was difficult to achieve for two reasons. One, a very frequent reason within ethnographic documentary filmmaking (or the filming of the real as it can be called), and one that anybody familiar with anthropological fieldwork knows (frustratingly) well: we do not control 100% the film (or the research) environment. Thus the planning possible is always subjected to the contingencies of others, the social actors who are the subjects of our research and of our filmmaking. The other was a reason specific to this project in as much as the knowledge that we needed as filmmakers, that is, the identification of life stories and social actors who could work well on camera and result in useful subjects for the goals of the documentary, and who would be willing to share their life conditions with an unknown audience (when one is being filmed one knows that the audience is not only made of the subjects who are filming...), would only start to be delineated by the end of the second year of the project, that is, by the time the project would move into more ethnography-based methodologies.

Other issues to be dealt with in any responsible film production were those involving the legal issues related to the rights that any individual has (as for instance the right to his/her own image), rights that had to be legally signed over to the film production. Within the research consortium itself, there were also legal issues to be addressed concerning the authorship rights and the production rights of the final work (such as for instance deciding on who would have the "final cut" decision), but there was also the need to decide which of all of the six national visual works laws involved in the consortium would be the one under which the film production legal issues would be dealt with if they ever emerged. These and other issues were issues that required discussion and decisions, like they do in any film production, but that in the case of this film, with its accentuated collaborative nature, were more acutely present, which, again, is a rare reality in ethnographic/anthropological filmmaking (that usually tends to mirror the single-individual nature of the actual research/fieldwork)¹⁰.

⁸ Concerning the self-reflection of the anthropological science on the nature and process of production of anthropological knowledge, see the essay in the emblematic work by Clifford and Marcus (1986).

⁹ The nine terrains were: Roma and Genoa (Italy); Barcelona (Spain); Berlin (Germany); Metz (France) (filmed by the University of Genoa team, based in Italy); Lisbon and Porto (Portugal); Madrid (Spain); Utrecht (The Netherlands) (filmed by the University of Fernando Pessoa team, based in Porto, Portugal).

¹⁰ In every consortium meeting (usually every six months during the three years of the project), there would always be a time slot for the discussion of the documentary filmmaking, making this deliverable perhaps the most discussed deliverable of the whole project.

The final option concerning the form of constructing and editing the documentary was of nine pieces (the “nine takes” of the title), each one referring to particular aspects of each site. There was a need to conform to the usual length of film (thinking of presentation in film festivals and possible showing on television), and in this case it was decided that the documentary would not exceed sixty minutes. This implied that there was a need to compose portraits of each site that would be between five to six minutes in length. This alone presented itself as a very particular difficulty in terms of the knowledge produced throughout the three years of research: the need to have to present the knowledge produced in relation to the complex social situation of a social context in a segment of only five minutes. The amount of material left out was, obviously, immense. And this is a fact that cannot be forgotten. The documentary could never be an object that conveyed the same quantity – or the same kind, for that matter – of knowledge as TRESEGY’s written reports did. As filmmakers and researchers, the choice was to try and have each context to illustrate particular aspects of that context itself, but also of the experiences of the lives researched, that is, the experiences of the European youths of immigrant descent. As the project progressed, it became clear to the consortium that the youths’ experiences from these different places shared several traits. So, each “take” of the film is not immediately labeled and identified as being from this city or the other. The objective was to spatially unmark each “take” so the film could be seen as a continuum and also, by spatially unmarking the opening of each “take”, to not ground the issues presented to one specific place/city/country and thus to allow for the creation of an empathy and possible identification of the viewer with the real people/social actors on the screen. There was also an intentional inclusion of images of TRESEGY’s researchers in the documentary. This was a way of making present to viewers the “backstage” (in a Goffmanian sense) of the knowledge being produced and being represented by the documentary itself. However, the film by itself is not able to make explicit everything about the social worlds researched and how that was achieved. The viewing of *In Between* and what can be taken from it will be different depending on the additional information that can be supplied to its viewers. In fact the documentary style and information were chosen so as to appeal to a young audience and to promote discussion and reflection on the issues that centered TRESEGY as a project. The documentary was constructed as a tool for dissemination of knowledge produced during the three years of the project, but, because of the partial nature of the medium (namely, its time/length limitations, but also the issues of filmmaking aesthetics and rhetoric), it was mainly constructed as a discussion tool, as an aide to promote awareness of the issues encountered in the terrains analyzed¹¹.

As it was already stated, a lot of the knowledge produced during the three years of research that TRESEGY carried out did not find its way into the film. However, *In Between*, due to the nature of its medium (motion picture) when viewed tends to present itself as “*what there is to be known about these social worlds*”, i.e., the representation of the social world researched tends to be assumed as being “just”, and exactly as it is depicted in the film, because *the camera tends to lie and the audience tends to believe*. Thus, film in ethnographic research should be used as a very useful tool and one that allows the portrayal of forms and types of knowledge and experiences that the written word cannot express equally well, but also as a tool that entails certain dangers of which the social scientists/filmmakers should be aware of and should make their audiences aware of also. It is hoped that the sharing of some of the specificities involving the production of *In Between* made in this paper will help shed some light over usually unlit areas of the role of filmmaking as a tool in ethnographic research.

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¹¹ This discussion-enabling nature of the documentary is also

linked to the fact that the distribution of the film was free of charge to people, associations and schools that wished to have it.

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