

The space between the filmmaker and the subject – the ethical encounter.

Abstract

Through the extended analysis of my documentary film *ABC Colombia*, (86min. 2007) the article discusses the premises of my *way of seeing* - a filmmaking practice conceived as a cognitive and relational process - and explores the space between the filmmaker and the subject, looking in particular at the centrality of the camera, as a catalyst and a conduit. Addressing notions of proximity and the encounter between the filmmaker and the subject, the article critically engages with a notion central to my practice, that of the ethical encounter - the face-to-face with the film subject - addressed through an engagement with Emmanuel Levinas' *phenomenology of the other* and the perspective of moral philosophy. What lessons can be learned for the construction of the subject in documentary filmmaking?

The article also retraces man's relationship with the camera from its inception via Rouch's seminal text 'Camera and Man', further articulating the camera's crucial role within a certain tradition of participatory and self-reflexive ethnographic filmmaking, which has been very influential to my film practice.

Keywords: Personal Camera, documentary subject; ethical encounter; filmmaker-subject relationship; the face-to-face; *ABC Colombia*.

A FORM OF LOOKING

Corporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera, and its relationship within the world.

D. MacDougall – *The Corporeal Image*

In *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*, leading ethnographic filmmaker and scholar David MacDougall, building upon ideas from his seminal work *Transcultural Cinema*, argues that visual images create 'a way of knowing that

is different from thinking'. Rather than 'trying to say something' – he states - most of a filmmaker's effort goes into 'putting the viewer into a particular relationship to a subject and creating a progression of images and scenes to understand it.' Thus, before being a form of communicating and representing, before expressing ideas, before describing anything films are 'a form of looking.'

When we look, we are doing something more deliberate than seeing and yet more unguarded than thinking. We are putting ourselves in a sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened awareness. Our imitative faculties take precedence over judgment and categorization, preparing us for a different kind of knowledge. We learn to inhabit what we see. Conversely, thinking about what we see, projecting our ideas upon it, turns us back upon ourselves. So, simply to look, and look carefully, is a way of knowing that is different from thinking. (2006:7)

The 'sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened awareness' directly resonates with my own experience of the particular state one finds oneself in while filming; a sort of lucid trance many filmmakers (Rouch in particular, but also Vertov, Ivens and MacDougall) have vividly described in their own writings. An acutely receptive state, during which one *tunes in* to the slightest movements of the other's body (mimesis) and *listens* to its faintest inflections, intentions and expressions with a highlighted focus and a concentration uncommon to daily encounters.

MacDougall's suggestive passage also strikingly evokes Levinas' idea of *proximity*, the call for a communication with the other effected through an openness and a passivity: the ethical encounter in which 'thought finds itself *faced* with another refractory to category.' (1969:40) While clearly filmmaking is far from passive, this mode of *attentiveness-to-the-other* attained during filming and a certain way of facing-the-other-through-the-camera – a way that necessarily presupposes a

relationship characterised by sensibility and affectivity, by caring and complicity – far from being inevitably a form of objectification and appropriation (as some critics have claimed) can be experienced and practiced as a form of ‘open reception’, a silent though alerted state where all sorts of epiphanies can thus become possible. An *exposure* to the other capable of shifting the balance from knowledge/appropriation to awareness/understanding; a practice where ‘the problem of knowledge and truth must thus be put in relation to the event of meeting and dialogue.’ (Levinas, 1993:15)

Filmmakers who practice this particular kind of participatory observation, such as Kim Longinotto, have described their modes as receptive and ‘gentle’, collaborative and dialogic¹. An approach this, that could not be further from the ‘soulless surveillance’ implicit in the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ notion and its ‘reality TV’ offsprings.

For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation. The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. (Levinas, 1969:50)

The ethical encounter, where the self is ‘charged with a responsibility that alters being

¹ FilmDoo’s interview with Kim Longinotto - Being a Documentary Filmmaker (Part One), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mbhDKNqE9Y>

² In *Fine Pena Mai - Life after Life* (1995) the stage is the Lifers’ prison on the Elba Island in Italy, in *Home Sweet Home* (2012) the Heygate Estate, which is also the ‘site of enquiry’ of my interactive work *Ghost Town* (2013-2016).

³ Flaherty developed Nanook’s rushes in his cabin and showed Nanook all the footage he shot. ‘He had no idea – reflects Rouch - that he was inventing, at that very instant, “participant observation”.’

irrevocably and from which compassion, solidarity and social justice emerge' (Renov 2004: 164) is a notion central to my filmmaking practice and I shall return to it to discuss how this applies to my work, and the key role the camera plays in it. Given the centrality of Levinas's *phenomenology of the other* and his *ethics of alterity* to documentary practice, I would however first like to further explore the implications of some of his radical propositions to both the documentary encounter, and to the debate about the kind of contribution documentary filmmaking can bring to the understanding of our shared humanity.

In *The Subject of Documentary*, Michael Renov reminds us that Levinas compellingly argues that a crucial element of our humanity eludes the very project of rational enquiry, rejects the 'knowledge producing enterprise' and invokes 'an order higher than knowing. An order that, resounding like a call, touches his individuality... From unique to unique, from one to the other... the wonder of a mode of thought better than knowledge.' (Levinas, 1993:3). Renov revisits Levinas' reasoning for his shift away from Ontology: '*I think* comes down to *I can* – writes Levinas – to an appropriation of what is, of an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power... possession is pre-eminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine' (Levinas, 1969:46, emphasis in original). Justice on the other end – Renov reminds us – depends on the willingness *to receive* from the other beyond the capacity of the I. This relation is an ethical one and it is epiphanous: 'reason, without abdicating, is found in a position *to receive*'. (Renov, 2004:151, emphasis in original) While firmly positing the centrality of Levinas's ethical philosophy to contemporary documentary practice, Renov puts a crucial and provocative question to the documentary practitioner: 'What is the "mode of thought better than knowledge" to which Levinas alludes, and how can it be approached

through an aesthetic practice such as documentary filmmaking in which (documentary) “subjects” are transformed into “objects” (of knowledge)?” (Ibid:148) Renov questions if – in Levinasian terms – any documentary remains inevitably a form of appropriation and/or exploitation. ‘Is this not the price of any textual authorship? Can any documentary hope to escape unscathed?’ (Ibid:148)

But is the transformation into an ‘object of knowledge’ the inevitable fate of the documentary subject? Or else, can documentary practice – given ‘an investment in otherness, in the necessity of responsibility and of the ethical encounter’ (Renov, 2004:167) – rather engender a unique and fertile space where self and other come ‘face-to-face’, in an encounter that has the potential to transform them both profoundly? Has documentary the capacity not only to bear witness and document but also to partake in constructing the possibility of this meaningful ‘encounter’? And can some of the qualities identified by Rouch in the ‘camera as a catalyst’ extend beyond his notion of ‘psychoanalytic stimulation’ capable of precipitating action and character revelation, to precipitating the ‘face-to-face’ encounter?

Renov’s concerns about what ‘real conversation’ can happen on tape, might suggest that old qualms about supposed links between ‘spontaneous’ and ‘authentic’, (as well as a notion of the ‘real’ as somewhat independent from a specific relational process) die hard. As an active filmmaker I differ with Renov’s scepticism and I would rather argue that – while a relationship mediated by the process of filming is clearly different from one which is not – there is no reason to believe that given the proper conditions and attitude, the process of making a film cannot become a generative arena of mutual discovery, understanding and co-creation of what philosopher of dialogue Martin Buber suggestively defines as the ‘sphere-of-between’ (2002, 202–205).. A ‘non-indifference’ to the other that in Levinas’ recasting of

Buber's centrality of the relation, also becomes the founding moment of selfhood, the very pre-condition for the construction of subjectivity. He writes: 'The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification' (1998:125).

Considering the inevitable 'co-creation' a certain documentary practice enacts, as well as its potential to foster and enable self-reflexivity not only in the maker but also in the subject filmed, could one – taking a less dismissive stance - thus imagine filming as a process capable of creating the special conditions of *listening* and complicity that can actually facilitate this kind of epiphany? A process through which the 'face-to-face' becomes possible, allowing for the fundamental condition of alterity to be grasped and thus provoking a responsibility for the other, an ethical obligation. A relational process – between the filmmaker and the subject – that, inscribing itself in the film images and the film-text, becomes an integral part of the narrative the film delivers, thus also allowing the audience to partake and witness the unfolding of that particular encounter and of its ethical significance. In what follows, I will engage with some of these questions through the analysis of my documentary film *ABC Colombia* (86min. 2007), and my own working methods. I will argue that filmmaking before (and alongside) being a mode of communication also allows for a unique and significant mode of relating and communicating between the filmmaker and the film subject, a qualitative 'listening' and a mutual awareness capable of profound transformation in both.

I would like to stress that what I am mostly concerned with addressing here is the influence of Levinas's *ethics of alterity* to my filmmaking practice at its moment of inception – rather than at the level of its reception – with the *exposure* to 'the face' of the Other as an encounter taking place in actuality, *in situ*, between human beings – a filmmaker and her subjects – sharing the same spatial and temporal coordinates, and

partaking in the process of making a film, rather than the aesthetic experience of spectatorship. I leave the productive encounters that can be staged between Levinas's thought and cinema at the level of reception to scholars far better positioned than myself to argue this complex ground. As a filmmaker, I am both better positioned and more interested in reflecting on the staging of the ethical encounter as a self-reflexive narrative, with the film-body becoming a 'site of significance' for the audience not only as far as the encounter with the Other, but also, crucially, as spectators of the face-to-face between the filmmaker and her subject.

ABC COLOMBIA

Their childhood has been a laborious learning about indifference, about fear, about uncertainty, about revenge. These children weaned by hatred, with whom was so stingy the milk of the human tenderness, preserve inside themselves a depth of innocence, of generosity and of cheerfulness, and deserve a society less selfish and less hypocritical, a society capable of putting in their hands something better than shotguns and machine guns.

William Ospina (Colombian poet and essayist)

The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification

E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*.

For me Colombia is not a foreign country. Having decided to share my life with a Colombian, the country has become one of the places of my existence, where I spend numerous months a year. *ABC Colombia* is an intimate portrait of a small rural community in a part of Colombia entirely controlled by paramilitary forces, rendered through the eyes of the children who grow up there, and are often forced into very difficult choices. The documentary accompanies its young protagonists and their teacher Lucenid in this problematic setting through an entire school year, exploring

some of the realities that nurture and perpetuate the violence in Colombia (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *ABC Colombia* postcard

The process of researching *ABC Colombia* started in 2004, alongside the construction of a home on a small piece of land in the Colombian Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta that my husband and myself had bought, together with some friends, 10 years earlier. The film also represents the first work of a trilogy engaging with the significant places of my existence, while at the same time interrogating and constructing my own particular belonging to each of these places.

ABC Colombia's initial concept was born out of a personal moral dilemma: some of the children that I had seen grow up, and over the years transform into hardened adolescents, provoked complex feelings within me. What secrets were hidden in their elusive gaze? Could I still embrace them? Should I be afraid? Could I be at ease thinking myself as part of – albeit in my own particular way – this contentious community? How shall I respond to certain choices, which I found extremely difficult to come to terms with?

ABC Colombia is, without doubt, principally an exploration of what it means to grow up in an area of conflict and to be confronted with very difficult choices. However, as my own need to understand and come to terms with this reality as well as my necessity to situate myself within it had initially motivated the project, the process of making the film also became a way of engaging with this personal dilemma, generating a fertile space where myself and the film subjects could come ‘face-to-face’, a *proximity* where thought found ‘itself *faced* with another refractory to category.’ (Levinas, 1969:40). The frames, the shots, the scenes, thus turned into the arena where my own interior conflicts and resolutions interacted with the various conflicts and resolutions I was witnessing and mediating through the film; the sites where I dialogically situated myself in relationship to what I was witnessing, where ‘reason, without abdicating, is found in a position *to receive*’. (Renov, 2004:151)

Not every documentary filmmaker shoots her own films, though for the many who do the identification of one's own gaze with that of the camera and the search for the *right distance* from the subject, of which the image is a direct reflection, has an irresistible attraction. I clearly belong to this group, as filmmaking is for me inseparable from the act of filming itself. Though every phase of the film process, from the conception to the screening of the finished film with an audience has its fascination, personally, the most significant moment happens during the shooting, when with my hand-held camera I *take position* within the situation I'm sharing with my subjects, and look at them as images in the viewfinder. Through the camera – extension of the eye, of desire, of a way of thinking and looking at the world – the other stops, for a brief moment, to be inexorably *external*, separate. The image seems to offer itself as a possible space where self and world coexist, inscribed as one inseparable unity, an *image-of-the-other-as-seen-by-me*.

If we imagine the self and the other – fragmentary and partial as they are – as mutually constitutive, then MacDougall’s assertion that ‘[t]he subject is part of the filmmaker, the filmmaker is part of the subject’ (1998:29) has possibly greater implications. As MacDougall acknowledges, ‘For many filmmakers, then, documentary is not just a way of representing the real, but of touching within themselves and others something more fleeting and precious.’ MacDougall defines this contact as ‘the quick’, the ‘deep inside’ of representation, and wonders: ‘Is the quick the pretext of the film, or the other way round?’ (1998:49) A difficult question... What is indisputable is the significance of this ‘connection’ to a certain film practice. ‘To the filmmaker, then, image-making is largely an extension of the self towards other, rather than a form of reception or appropriation.’ (Ibid: 29)

My working methods always include the identification of key characters to accompany over time and, crucially, the importance of developing an intimate relationship with them as they become, to a certain extent, partakers and accomplices in the filmmaking process. Give the context, the themes and the young age of the subjects this was particularly so for *ABC Colombia*. While I had know most of children in the area for several years, identifying and gaining the trust of the main young protagonists, Miguel Angel, (Figure 2) who was only 12 year old at the time and Huriday, seventeen, became a significant part of the process of constructing the possibility of a meaningful ‘encounter’, allowing for the fundamental condition of alterity to be grasped and provoking a responsibility for the other, an ethical obligation.



Figure 2. Miguel Angel in his kitchen (from the film)

THE MAIN STAGE

My films - generally shot over an extended period of time – also tend to have a central spatial unity, a sort of ‘main stage’ (skené) where the *drama* unfolds². The significance of place is not only a recurring theme in my work, but it also denotes that traditional dramaturgical narrative devices are an important cinematic reference (with all the relative conventions of story and character development).

Place also situates experience, contributing to articulating and foregrounding ‘the place one looks from’, while delivering the coordinates for the more complex social space. As Simmel points out in his seminal essay *The Stranger* ‘spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations’ (in Wolff, 1950:402).

² In *Fine Pena Mai - Life after Life* (1995) the stage is the Lifers’ prison on the Elba Island in Italy, in *Home Sweet Home* (2012) the Heygate Estate, which is also the ‘site of enquiry’ of my interactive work *Ghost Town* (2013-2016).

When I started to research and develop *ABC Colombia* it was immediately clear to me that the main setting of the film would be the one-room local school – a single elementary class gathering 25 children between 5 and 15 years old, an age at which one usually finishes elementary schooling hereabouts. But not everybody finishes, as many have already started to work as *raspachines* - coca leaf pickers - or to patrol the mountains for the paramilitary, to protect the area – where there are enormous stretches of coca plantation – from infiltration by guerrillas or the army. The school gathers children otherwise dispersed among their farms and is their principal space of interaction and expression, both formal and informal. It is also the place where principles and directions of growth are imparted to them as future adults. Schools and teachers are therefore often used by the paramilitary that control the territory as the first and most effective instruments of ‘indoctrination’. The small school on the Don Diego river is no exception.

Education is clearly one of the major issues for the local youth, as unfortunately poor education is rather the norm in these areas. Yet, initially I had not intended for the teacher to be a central figure in the film – as the children were the main focus. However, when I went back to Colombia in April 2005 for my second research period, a new teacher, Lucenid, had just arrived from teaching coca farmers’ children at an even remoter place up in the Sierra. A rural child raised in an area of conflict herself, Lucenid was a different kind of person from other teachers who had come and gone in previous years. Someone who had fought hard to finish her schooling and realise her dream of becoming a teacher – going without eating to pay the school fee and walking long distances through unsafe territories to attend classes – she was both caring and determined to motivate the children to learn (Figure 3),

which – much like myself – she saw as their only chance to improve their future. Also, living locally, she was part of the community.



Figure 3. Lucenid and Miguel Angel (from the film)

I felt immediately drawn to Lucenid as a person, and curious to see how her challenge would play out. Moreover, when I learned that she had to leave the previous place after the play she had been trying to put on with the children was banned by the paramilitary, my Rouchian instincts – about situations capable of provoking the surfacing of latent, either unconscious or difficult to enunciate, truths – pricked up. To develop a play with the children imagining and acting out stories portraying their daily reality sounded like a great way to give them an unproblematic space of expression where – at least partially freed from the social taboo by performing – they could enact their spontaneous emotions about their reality. But was Lucenid – given the previous experience – ready to take the risk? Amazingly, she was.

THE CAMERA AS AN ACCOMPLICE

Many theoreticians and filmmakers alike have claimed the potential of the cine-eye as a catalyst of a 'deeper-truth', as well as of cinema as a 'machine a penser' (see Benjamin, Vertov, Balatz, Rouch, Deleuze), capable of producing a 'different kind of knowledge', or even of radically transforming the way we think. Let's briefly explore these claims, which are of course significantly interrelated. In his seminal paper 'Camera and Man' (1973), Rouch retraces man's relationship with the camera from its inception, reflecting on its fundamental double-nature:

Was the cinema going to be an objective instrument capable of capturing the life and behavior of man? The marvelous ingenuity of Lumiere's *Sortie des Usines*, *Dejeuner de Bebe* and *Peche a la Crevette* permitted one to believe that it could.

But from the beginning, the camera was equally revealed to be a 'thief of reflections.' Perhaps those workers hardly paid attention to Lumiere's little cranking box as they left the factory. But some days later, upon seeing the projection of the brief images, they suddenly became conscious of an unknown magical ritual - that old fear of the fatal meeting with one's double.

Equally, Rouch identifies Flaherty and Vertov – two very different filmmakers sharing a fascination for the cine-eye and the filmic process, which they both conceived as a collaborative process – as the 'two men that we owe everything that we are trying to do today.'

If Flaherty and *Nanook* were able to tell the difficult story of the struggle of man against a thriftless but beneficial nature, it was because there was a third party with them. This small, temperamental, but faithful machine, with an infallible visual memory, let *Nanook* see his own images in proportion to their birth. It is

this camera that Luc de Heusch so perfectly called the ‘participatory camera’.
(Rouch, 1973:3)³

By Rouch’s own admission, French *cinéma-vérité* – the movement he founded in the 1960s to experiment with the possibilities offered by synchronous sound and light portable cameras – was influenced by Flaherty’s participatory approach (also claimed by the more observational American ‘Direct Cinema’), as well as being inspired by Dziga Vertov’s theory of *kino-pravda*, which translates precisely to *cinéma-vérité*.

Undoubtedly Vertov is also one of the forefathers of Deleuze’s idea of cinema as a medium wherein new forms of thought manifest itself for the first time, as cinema not only puts ‘movement in the image, but also puts movement in the mind’ (Deleuze, 2000:366). While Deleuze’s reflections on cinema are too complex to properly address here, what is relevant to this discussion is his proposition of cinema as an art capable of producing new ways of thinking and knowing (Deleuze 1984, 1989). As MacDougall points out, a filmmaker’s knowledge is often believed to lie in the film’s conclusions, expressed through a visual rhetoric that juxtaposes shots and scenes, or at a more general level explains behaviour through narratives of power, exchange, belief and emotions. However, ‘[t]hese are the “messages” that the film communicates.’ he writes ‘A kind of visual reasoning has taken place. Yet the filmmaker has seen and knows much more that can be communicated in this way. Is it possible to transmit this knowledge – which cannot be conceptualized to others? ... Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable.’ (2006:5)

³ Flaherty developed Nanook’s rushes in his cabin and showed Nanook all the footage he shot. ‘He had no idea – reflects Rouch - that he was inventing, at that very instant, “participant observation”.’

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously draws a distinction between saying and showing: ‘What can be shown cannot be said’ (4.1212). However, as James Williams argues in *The Transversal Thought of Gilles Deleuze: Encounters and Influences*, Deleuze – by adding a third term, *expression*, and asserting that the ‘most powerful things, things without which life is incomplete, can only be expressed’ – ‘sets an aesthetic dramatisation at the heart of his philosophy. His accounts of art insist on the expressive power of works over and above what they can represent.’ (2006:46) This yearning towards filming the invisible – that which cannot be said or shown – or, to use Robert Bresson’s beautiful metaphor, ‘To translate the invisible wind by the water it sculpts in passing’ (Bresson, 1996:76) is, I would argue as an active filmmaker, one of the most powerful and distinct drives of film as language and practice. One which is clearly brought to the fore by Joris Ivens’ testimonial film *Une histoire de vent* (A Tale of the Wind, 1989), and in particular by the memorable scene where the aging filmmaker sits at the edge of the desert, awaiting the wind for what seems an eternity till he faints of exhaustion; and then again, until the wind finally – cathartic and beautifully entrancing – arrives. Merging landscape and mindscape with breath-taking effect, the scene also upholds – through the image of a sorceress placing a ‘wind-machine’ next to Iven’s chair while tracing in the sand the silhouette of a dragon, the Taoist symbol of the autumn wind – the somewhat *magical* nature of filmmaking; a notion that is already central to Rouch’s approach, but also undoubtedly implicit in many of the claims concerning the cine-eye. That’s how Rouch describes his own way of working with the camera:

For me, the only way to film is to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it, trying to make it as alive as the people it is filming. I consider this dynamic improvisation to be a first synthesis of Vertov's cine-eye and Flaherty's participating camera.

Thus instead of using the zoom, the cameraman-director can really get into the subject. Leading or following a dancer, priest, or craftsman, he is no longer himself, but a mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear. It is this strange state of transformation that takes place in the filmmaker that I have called, analogously to possession phenomena, 'cine-trance'. (1973:8)

Walking-with-the-camera was made possible by the new lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronous tape-recorders, which appeared at the end of the 1950s, liberating the camera from its immobility and transforming the camerapersons into 'living cameras'. (1973:7)⁴ Among the first to use the equipment were Leacock (*Primary*, 1960 and *Indianapolis* 1960) in the United States, and Morin, Brault, and Rouch (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961) in France.

Both Rouch and Leacock were my teachers at Les Ateliers Varan in Paris at the end of the Eighties. Charismatic, in love with life, and with a child-like curiosity that made them always ready to innovate and experiment, these two towering figures of documentary filmmaking had no-doubt a lasting influence on my formation as a young filmmaker. While Leacock and Rouch were closer (as friends) than either manifestos or indeed film practice might suggest, Rouch was a far more political and self-reflexive filmmaker, who never really shared Leacock's initial faith in the 'transparency of image-making', and who was far more interested in the camera's potential to 'unveil the hidden truths', in its qualities as a catalyst capable of precipitating action and character revelation. In that sense I have always felt closer to Rouch's *way of seeing* and to his belief in the power of the camera to *generate reality*:

⁴ The Living Camera was also the name of Leacock's production company in the early '60s.

Yes the camera deforms – says Rouch – but not from the moment it becomes an accomplice. At that point it has the possibility of doing something I couldn't do if the camera weren't there: it becomes a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant, which lets people do things that they wouldn't otherwise do.⁵

But has the presence of the camera also the potential of fostering, stimulating the ethical encounter? In what follows, I will further discuss the space between the filmmaker and the subject, and the role the camera plays in its construction and articulation, looking in particular at the camera as an accomplice, a presence capable of generating complicity and collaboration with the film subjects in *ABC Colombia*.

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The role of performing, role-playing, re-enacting personal experiences and psychodramatic techniques in general can play in triggering and embodying 'deep rooted' emotional truths and/or taboos is well posited (as well as problematised) by Rouch, who implemented it in several of his early works⁶. It has more recently been used by works influenced by his approach, most notably Rithy Panh's *S21, The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2004) and Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012). This delicate and ethically controversial performative approach, while needing to be employed in a careful, thoughtful and considerate way, can produce extremely interesting results, as it has a distinct power to 'access' layers of experience that might otherwise be off-limits.

⁵ Rouch, cited in G Roy Levin *Documentary explorations: Fifteen interviews with filmmakers*, Garden City, New York, 1971:137

⁶ Such as *Les maîtres fous*; *Moi, un noir* ; *Chronique d'une été* ; *La Pyramide Humaine* (just to mention the most renowned). After this latter, Rouch felt this approach was quite problematic, from an ethical perspective, and decided not to use it any longer.

The school play and its process of preparation represent a small scale, but interesting, implementation of this technique in *ABC Colombia*, constructing another level of narration and expression of the children's daily experience running through the film. The preparation of the school play allowed Lucenid to engage the children with themes that would otherwise be considered awkward or taboo (such as the armed conflict, the illegal crops, the way the *paras* control the area), while also empowering them, through discussions about what to 'put-on-scene' and through improvised role-playing, to vividly express their values and how they perceive their reality. For this to work, Lucenid's imaginative involvement was, of course, crucial.

The trust and complicity I immediately felt towards Lucenid was clearly reciprocated by her openness to express dilemmas and taboos – like speaking overtly about the paramilitary presence in the area and its impact on the children – something I had never been able to do with anyone else in the community, let alone on camera! Considering I had known most people – to various degrees – for almost ten years, this was a truly remarkable encounter. After a few more meetings to discuss her work as a teacher and how the filming could work alongside it, we started. Much like the characters of *Sisters-in-Law* (2005) – Longinotto and Florence Ayesi's film about women judges in Cameroon – Lucenid understood perfectly what was at stake and what the film was trying to explore and responded to this in a remarkable way. Each from our quite different and distinct roles – me the filmmaker and Lucenid the school-teacher – we undoubtedly collaborated in the making of *ABC Colombia*. This shared process was further enhanced by – particularly at the beginning – Lucenid and myself looking together at the material shot during her classes.

Digital video has clearly made the long tradition of showing the rushes to your characters – as a way of sharing the experience and process of filmmaking with them

– a far easier task than when Flaherty had to build his developing lab at Hudson Bay to project his images for Nanook, or when Rouch showed his material on a small moviescope viewer. This experience is, of course, particularly significant in remote parts of the world, such as the Sierra Nevada, where people have no access to television (or indeed to cinema) and are totally unused to seeing themselves ‘from the outside’, to partake in the other’s gaze. In this circumstance, the camera-cum-projector can retain its full *magic* power as a catalyst. This process, as Rouch eloquently argues, not only produces a very particular, unique, kind of knowledge and insight into the reality explored and its layers of complexity, but it is also – at least for filmmakers working within a certain tradition – a fundamental condition of the ‘ethical encounter’:

By studying this film on a small moviescope viewer with my informants, I was able to gather more information in two weeks than I could get in three months of direct observation and interview. This type of a posteriori working is just the beginning of what is already a new type of relationship between the anthropologist and the group he studies, the first step in what some of us have labelled ‘shared anthropology.’ Finally, then, the observer has left the ivory tower; his camera, tape recorder, and projector have driven him, by a strange road of initiation, to the heart of knowledge itself. And for the first time, the work is judged not by a thesis committee but by the very people the anthropologist went out to observe. This extraordinary technique of ‘feedback’ (which I would translate as ‘audiovisual reciprocity’) has certainly not yet revealed all of its possibilities... But already, thanks to it, the anthropologist has ceased to be a sort of entomologist observing others as if they were insects (thus putting them down) and has become a stimulator of mutual awareness (hence dignity). (1973:11)

As far as *ABC Colombia* this kind of collaboration was even more far-reaching, with another of its central characters, Huriday, a local adolescent who turned 18 during the shooting. But before getting into this story I would like to say a few words about

gaining access to film in this difficult-to-access, let alone to film, community.

The significant access was undoubtedly helped by a series of conditions. Myself and my husband had been part of this community – albeit in our own way – for several years and we were also in the process of building, with local workmanship, our dwelling within it. This made us both known and to a certain extent I believe trusted, but also it put us in a position to eventually ‘take personal responsibility’ of any misuse of trust. Nolasco, the community leader – who in these areas is also the go-between the paramilitaries and the community – knew us well, as he was also the person in charge of the construction, and therefore agreed to present our plan to film to *los-de-arriba*⁷, without whose consent nothing was possible. This was a particularly tense period, the Sierra had recently been fumigated as part of the Plan Colombia⁸, aimed to eradicate the illegal crops, and – even more problematically – *el patron*, who had been ruling the area for 25 years was resisting calls to lay down arms and surrender himself and his splinter group to Colombian President Uribe, who was negotiating with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the so-called ‘peace process’. Nonetheless, the fact that I was a woman who wanted to make a film about children mostly set in the local school – rather than a man interested in more controversial issues – must have convinced *los-de-arriba* that this was something not

⁷ As the paramilitary are referred to, in a whisper: literally “those above”, referring to the mountains, yet also implying the hierarchical relations.

⁸ The US government began granting large amounts of aid to Colombia in 2000 under the Clinton administration as a strategy to combat drugs, mainly through military means. Since the beginning of Plan Colombia, the US has given Colombia over \$5 billion with the vast majority going to Colombia's military and police, rather than invested in economic and social assistance. From Amnesty International:
<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/americas/colombia/us-policy-in-colombia>, accessed 10 May 2015.

to be taken too seriously or be too worried about. We had nonetheless to agree not to screen the film publicly in Colombia, on TV or in the cinema. A decision that – to a certain extent – also reassured the community that feared being recognised and stigmatised, or worse.⁹ *ABC Colombia*'s main audiences were therefore the very local – the community itself, to whom I showed the final film – and the global, mostly a western (European and US) film and TV audience, as well as the human rights and academic research contexts. The film showed to the community was, however, slightly re-edited, with a few problematic scenes – both with Lucenid and with Huriday (more about this in a moment) – removed, as some of the things they said might put them at risk within the community. These were replaced by a couple of scenes that I had wanted to include in the film, but had to be cut out because of time constraints. One of these - an 11min long scene in which Lucenid keeps after class two children who had been fighting during the recreation, and doesn't allow them to leave till they finally agree, extremely reluctantly, to make peace and shake hands, is a very moving and telling moment, delivering a powerful insight into the values that – even at that early age – perpetuate violence in a country which has not know peace for almost 60 years.

⁹ The effect the film could have on its participants' lives was an extremely serious issue. Being identified as belonging to a paramilitary community could have life-threatening consequences, particularly for Huriday, who was considering joining the paras. I decided therefore to also block the VOD (video on demand) from ARTE (which is normally included in the contract of distribution), fearing someone could get hold of the film and this could find its way to Colombia. Since 2006 things have considerably changed and *ABC Colombia* has been screened in Colombia in several contexts, festivals and private screenings.

CROSSING THE LINE

The first time I met Huriday he was 12 years old. He was accompanying his father – a local stonemason very experienced in the indigenous art of stone terracing without cement – who had come to construct a stone terrace to prepare our rather steep land for the building of the house.

Since the fumigation of coca crops there wasn't a lot to do for coca-pickers in the area and Huriday was looking for work. A very bright kid, coming from a broken family, Huriday - who had been taking care of himself since very young and knew this reality from the inside - seemed the ideal person to work as my research assistant and help me identify adolescents who might agree to participate in the film. During a few weeks we met and talked about young people like him, about the challenges his generation faced – particularly as the situation was in constant flux – how were they responding, what alternatives were there? And, more controversially, how did they feel about joining the paramilitaries - one of the few works on offer, but also a wholesale set of values and attitudes?

Huriday was instantly fascinated by the camera and – as I taught him to shoot – he soon turned out to be a great camera assistant. Also, as my Spanish was still a bit rough and local people, in particular the kids, spoke their own broken Spanish, after each shoot we would sit together to transcribe the cassettes. These moments turned out to be some of the most knowledge-rich moments of the entire process, as Huriday - in his attempt to explain what was said (which was often 'coded') or the situation - was delivering the most insightful *translation*/cultural mediation allowing for a profound understanding of local situations and ways of thinking, which would have otherwise been way beyond my reach.

This proximity and collaboration created a strong bond and – while he did come up with some candidates for the adolescent character, who eventually turned out to be minor characters in the film – I was becoming increasingly aware that it was *his* story I wanted to tell. The challenges he faced – his struggle to adjust to the increasingly sporadic work as coca-picker, his toying with the idea of joining the paramilitaries – were those of all the kids of his age. Moreover, he had links to Lucenid and the school, which he had started to attend in the hope to further his education (he only had till 5th grade) and better his chances. But, most importantly, the trust and bond that had developed between us was priceless: given the context and the themes, he needed to feel secure that I would not put his life at risk. Nonetheless, given that Huriday is quite an introvert, guarded person hiding behind a dark, caustic sense of humour and that the stakes were rather high, the process of his opening up to the camera was not unproblematic. Initially he was mostly filmed during group situations, the coca-picking scenes (Figure 4) or when he attended school.



Figure 4. Huriday coca-picking (from the film)

However he was always present as part of the crew both during shooting and during the cassettes' transcribing and his collaboration to the filmmaking process can be best described a continuous and *in-crescendo* crossing-of-the-line; the line from behind to in front of the camera, the line between being a paid crew member and a character in the film, the line between being a character and collaborating in the making of the film, the line between his inner-self and the persona he was performing, the line between what he was and what he was becoming. I suppose that – to a certain extent – he was mirroring my own line-crossing; from visitor to dweller to documentary director, to film subject, to... The face-to-face encounter was transforming us both.

The turning point in our relationship through-the-lens happened towards the end of the shooting, when – during an interview - suddenly and unexpectedly Huriday confessed to having taken part – as early as 15 - in helping with 'dismembering' bodies. A horrendous practice used by paramilitaries to 'disappear' people.

This chilling revelation – delivered while washing his trousers, rendering the interiorisation and normalisation of horror in its fully disturbing dimension – is a potent example of that rare phenomenon known as 'an epiphany', a revelation, which Rouch draws attention to when talking about the camera as a catalyst. While we had discussed many times the subject of people disappearance, and the psychological dimension of some of the chilling practices used by the paras, I had never dared asking him how close had he himself come to witness these acts. Was he speaking about something he had heard people talk about, or was he speaking from first-hand experience? Did I really want to know? Was I afraid that asking would put too much of a strain on our relationship? Was he ready to go that far?

But when Huriday – frustrated by the many failed attempts to resolve his economic situation – cracked a joke about setting up a business and becoming a contract-killer I suddenly felt the moment had arrived: ‘and do you feel ready to kill?’ After an initial attempt to hide behind his dark humour, he suddenly let go, and launched into a painfully detailed description of how you cut up a body, and confessing that – while the first time it was profoundly distressing – you then get used to it, ‘it becomes normal...’ I was left speechless.

This scene (<https://vimeo.com/222357650>) did not find its way into the film till very late in the process, as - having qualms with how it might portray him to those who didn’t know him well – I had left it out of the selection. One day the editor - who was unusually working on his own – found it and added it to the film. By then I must have been ready to take this on board, and while a lot of work went into it before it found its final shape, I had to agree it was too important to leave it out. I did, however, remove it from the film I brought back to the community.

After that moment my relationship with Huriday became, paradoxically, even closer. Had he feared that if he confessed I would withdraw? Had I been touched so profoundly by what a young boy was exposed to in this part of the world, that I felt like embracing him and getting him out of there as soon as possible, rather than disgusted? The last scene I shot with him – after he decides to join the paramilitary – is revelatory of this stepping up of the relationship. As I challenge him about the consequences of his choice, he snaps, ‘I know what I am getting into, I do, believe me... but I will have to obey, even if it is going to be hard’. ‘And if they ask you to kill me?’ He laughs, the nervous laugh he has when emotionally challenged, ‘Pray you don’t fuck it up, otherwise you’re going to have it’ and then becoming suddenly serious ‘There is nothing we can do Enrica... That is life (Así es la vida, así es).’

ABC Colombia's final scene is set in my newly finished house, which is built on the land where Miguel Angel, the youngest protagonist, was actually born and spent the first years of his life. Miguel Angel – now 12, the age his brothers Pedrito and Chepe (who both joined the paramilitaries) were when I first met them, still-a-child-but-not-for-much-longer – reflects, sitting in my hammock, on the future and on growing up. Both final conversations with Huriday and Miguel Angel are extremely personal, calling directly into question the nature of our relationship, one that clearly far exceeds, on both sides, that of filmmaker/subject (see <https://vimeo.com/222357914>).

A few days later – after the end of the shooting – I proposed to Huriday that he leave the area. My husband and myself would help him while he established himself in Bogota and found some steady work. He has now finished his secondary school, he's married, lives and works in Bogota and has a beautiful daughter. Many of the kids of his generation were not so lucky.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents an extended analysis of *ABC Colombia*, the first film of a trilogy engaging - from the perspective of an insider/outsider - with different places and communities I belong to and inhabit.

Outlining film's potential as an analytical tool, a way of making sense of complex social interactions and of articulating meaning audio-visually through non-literal means, the paper delivers a 'view from the inside', reflecting on how both the subjects of my films and myself as filmmaker experience the act of making them.

Through the analysis of my film methods, in particularly of *ABC Colombia*, I unpack my filmmaking practice as a relational process, a way of connecting and

making sense of the world, also capable of precipitating the ethical encounter with the film subject, of raising awareness of the responsibility towards the other. I argue that filmmaking before (and alongside) being a mode of communication allows for a unique and significant mode of relating and communicating between the filmmaker and her subject, a qualitative ‘listening’ and a mutual awareness capable of profound transformation in both.

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NOTE

The film underlying this article was submitted to the RAE (2008) and can be accessed at: *ABC Colombia*: <https://vimeo.com/111630428> (Password : ABCEnrica)

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