

The documentary film as a tool for the Ethnography of Performance

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Abstract

My research on the Ethnography of Performance has been making use of film, first as a memory aid which allows me to review details of the rituals that I have observed, and after, by chance, by producing a documentary film.

I made that first film with the aim of letting my friends know about what I was doing in the south of India. My research lies in the field of Performance Studies and my attention is focused on several aspects of the “doing” of the ritual of the Teyyams, a cult followed by some Hinduists of a specific area, and characterized by the “transformation” of the performer into a divinity.

The documentary was relatively successful and I am currently involved in the production of a new film. But in the meantime, I have lost some of the innocence which engaged me in the production of the first film, and I face some doubts.

In this text I address these issues.

Keywords: Ethnography of Performance, Documentary film, Visual Anthropology, Teyyam.

Introduction

I have been conducting ethnographic field research on the cult of the *teyyams* from North Kerala, since 2015. I use the observations on the ritual performance to establish a practical foundation for my questionings on aspects of performance theory.

Within this research, I have made use of the video camera and shot portions of the ritual, in order to review details, to discuss specific features with local informants, to transmit observations, and to illustrate papers delivered at conferences and through other academic or non-academic forms of communication. In 2016, I produced a documentary film¹ and, at the moment of writing, I am in the process of editing a new one. With this article I intend to share my experiences and formulate questions about the use of documentary film as a tool for ethnographic description.

I will start by describing very briefly the cult of the *teyyams*, a distinct religious tradition within Hinduism, practiced in the northern districts of Kerala, in the south of India, and the adjustments that are taking place as a result of cultural, social, and economical changes in its context. Then I will explain the fundamentals and the guidelines of my investigation into the domain of Performance Studies and of Performance theory, and explain how the ethnographic study of the cult of the *teyyams* contributes to my objective, providing some practical examples, in which the use of film is contemplated.

These explanations will hopefully allow clarification of my question: to what extent is the film documentary a useful and truthful tool for the Ethnography of Performance? Even if this is not the place for an analysis of the state of the art in Visual Anthropology, my questioning leads me to that domain of academic knowledge, and to its institutionalized doctrine, and it is mostly in a dialogue with its theorists that I will outline my inquiry.

With this exercise I do not mean to establish definite answers, but rather to systematize questions and identify problems and limits to the use of ethnographic documentary.

The cult of the *Teyyams* from North Kerala

The cult of the *teyyams* is a religious tradition practiced in the northern districts of Kerala. It concerns mostly the lower Hindu castes of the population and its distinctive feature is the embodiment of a divinity into an assigned performer, through a ritual that combines elements of dance, music and singing, and storytelling. The *teyyam*, with the body and face elaborately painted and decorated, peculiarly dressed and ornamented, mostly with raw natural materials, presents an intriguing figure that has aroused the curiosity of many outsiders, in addition to its native devotees.

Context

The State of Kerala, located at the southern end of the Indian subcontinent, is one of the most developed states of the Indian Union. Its score on the Human Development Index was 0.779 in 2018, the highest in India. The mountainous terrain, the numerous rivers and backwaters, and the lush vegetation of its landscape contrast with the arid plain that characterizes most of the neighboring regions. Its borders were defined based on the Malayalam language and correspond approximately to the territories that, in medieval times, constituted the kingdoms of Travancore, Cochin, Calicut and Kolatunadu. Like the language, its culture is the result of the historical fusion of the existing Dravidian population with the colonizing Brahmans, and the cosmopolitanism resulting from its orientation towards the Arabian Sea and the trade of spices.

Today, its richness accrues from the fertility of its soil, but mostly, from the high level of education of the population. This is preferred as immigrant labor force in the countries of the Persian Gulf, with beneficial results for the state's economy.

This newly enriched population belongs, for the most part, to the lower castes of the Hindu social stratification system. Their parents and grandparents, pollutants for the higher castes, were not allowed into the Hindu Brahminical temples, and generally

practiced their religion in sacred woods, according to their Dravidian tradition and distinct interpretation of Hinduism.

The word “caste” is of Latin origin and was introduced by the Portuguese to emphasize the endogamous and segregationist social structure. I will not try to give a general definition of caste, as it seems impossible due to the complexity of the phenomenon (Ghurye 1969), but I have to accentuate that most of these hereditary groups, known as *jatis*, were subject to a very violent discrimination, subjugation, and exploitation, until very recently.



Image 1 – Muthappan Nambola and Thiruvappan, two very popular *teyyams*. Still frame from research film by the author, January 2020.

The contemporary legal and social framework, which started still during British rule but was emphasized after Independence, prohibits negative discrimination based on caste. But the *jatis* did not cease to exist: it is an essential element of personal identity, and it still determines almost all the basic aspects of social life, such as the constitution of the family, the place of residence and even the profession of each one.

Nowadays, with a new economic status and conditions, some of the formerly subjugated low castes, turn to their traditions in search of identity references, bringing new vigor and social relevance to practices that were despised in the past, and to differentiated interpretations on Hinduism.

Hinduism is not a hegemonic religion. A verdict from the Indian Supreme Court declared Hinduism to be, not even a religion, but “a way of life and nothing more” (Klostermaier 1994), and it has been differently defined as a “culture”, a “religion”, a “religious tradition”, or a “complex of beliefs and practices” (Sharma 2003). It represents a spectrum “ranging from polytheism to monotheism, from pluralism to monism, from ceremonialism to mysticism, and from religious moralism to secular amorality” (Frazier 1969, 5-6), synthesizing a variety of local indigenous beliefs, traditions and practices under the dominant Sanskrit Brahminical doctrine (Freeman 1991). In the case of the cult of the *teyyams*, fully integrated into Hinduism although distinctive, there is evidence of its rooting in ancient tribal and Dravidian magical and religious practices.

The tradition of the *teyyams* is followed in the districts of Kannur and Kasaragod, and in some adjacent parts of the district of Wayanad, in the north

of the State of Kerala, an area corresponding to the Kolatunadu kingdom of feudal times, and frequently referred to as North Malabar.

The ritual tradition

The word *teyyam* is a vulgarization of the Sanskrit term *daiva* (Menon 1979), divinity, and it refers to the embodiment, in defined ritual conditions and into a specifically chosen performer, of a deity, that can be a Hindu or village God or Goddess, an ancestor, a legendary hero, an animal, or a force of nature. It is important to highlight that the *teyyam* is not a representation, but the divinity itself, a living God. It is not possible to say how many *teyyams* there are: some scholars refer to about four hundred, but there are also those who raise this number to almost six hundred, although many are local variations, which differ in name, or in some of the physical attributes, or aspects of its myth. Each *teyyam* is unique and refers to an ancestral legend, and it is this tale that is evoked by the *teyyam* performance.

The image of the *teyyam* is strangely beautiful: the body and face are painted with natural pigments and ornamented with elaborate drawings (writings, as it is correctly named). The exuberant outfits are manufactured primarily with raw materials: palm leaves, straw, reeds, and brightly colored fabrics and, most of the time, have to be made anew for each occasion. Most of the *teyyams* carry symbolic weapons: swords, tridents, bow and arrows, maces, and altogether they assume a powerful stance. Although many of the deities are female, the performers are always male².



Image 2 – A *kavu*. In the foreground, a shrine of the *teyyam*; at left, a *kalashatara*; in the background, the *aniara*. Still frame from research film by the author, January 2020.

The *teyyams* are the object of worship in North Malabar, usually in *kavus*, or sacred groves, which are the temples of the lower castes, although the ceremonies can also take place in a family home, in an agricultural field or other place that is intended to be propitiated, by means of construction of a temporary sanctuary, or *pathi* (Kurup 1973). The *kavu* consists of a yard (*arangu*), with a shrine (*pallyyara*) for each *teyyam* dwelling there, altars for different ritual functions (*kalashatara*, to place a calabash with palm wine, *thenghakkalu*, to break coconuts, for example), and dressing rooms for the performers (*aniara*). Some *teyyams* may have their abode in a tree, in various

kavus there will be an enclosure for the serpent gods (*nagakavu*), there might be a well or a pound. Ultimately, each *kavu* is singular, in accordance with the ritual tradition of the village or the family that owns it.

The *teyyam* performers belong to outcaste tribes or to the lower castes of the social stratification system but, during the performance of the ritual, they are considered a manifestation of the divinity and treated as such. Nevertheless, the cult of the *teyyams* is despised by the elites, not only because it is a form of worship of the lower classes, but also because it includes a series of practices considered impure and polluting by the mainstream Hinduism, such as animal sacrifices and, for instance, the consumption and offering of alcoholic beverages.

The most frequent type of ceremony, with the participation of *teyyams*, is the *kaliattam*, literally "a danced story", which takes place annually, on a fixed date of the local calendar (*Kollam*), in each of the *kavus* that follow this tradition. The *kavu* may be part of a traditional joint family property or belong to a village or to a given community, and be administrated by an elected commission, but the *kaliattam* will involve all the population of the village or town, with the different castes being requested to participate in specific ways. In some villages, even the Muslims are asked to contribute, bringing the fireworks, for example, and there are *teyyams* that are the personification of Muslim ancestors.

The *kaliattam* of each *kavu* is unique: it has its own *teyyams*, in a number that may go from two or three to fifteen or more, it may last for a night and a day to several consecutive days, and it may include various ceremonies, depending on the family or village traditions. But, in general, all *kaliattams* follow certain procedures, which allow for a general description. It takes place mostly through the night, illuminated by bonfires and flame torches, and the ambience is set by the beat of the drums.

Preparation begins a month in advance, when a brief ceremony takes place in the *kavu*, in which the *adeyalam*, or "signal", is delivered: the parties involved, performers and temple administrators, assume the mutual commitments regarding the performance of the ritual and performers receive a symbolic payment. Negotiation follows complex procedures: for each *kavu*, according to tradition, it is defined which communities of performers must perform the rituals; performers are entitled to a pecuniary reward whose value is not defined *a priori*; determining the value of the performers' fees is therefore difficult, because temple administrators cannot seek the services of other performers at more convenient prices; neither can performers fail to perform a *kaliattam* that is attributed to them by virtue of tradition. So, an agreement has to be reached at any cost.

On the day of the *kaliattam*, the performers arrive at the *kavu*, bringing with them the fabrics, props and natural materials that they will use in the outfits of the *teyyams*. From that moment on, the performers and

their assistants will take care of the preparation of the costumes, made, for the most part, with branches, foliage, flowers and vegetable fibers.

By that time the temple is already a place of great bustle, with the various officiators busy preparing for the ceremony. In the *kavu*, the celebrant who presides over the rites is the *karmi*, who, most of the time, belongs to the family that owns the temple, and so it is not a professional priest but an elder peasant skilled in magic and with knowledge of the ritual procedures.

The whole process of the *kaliattam* can be interpreted in light of tantric philosophy as the transferring and amplifying of sacred energy, *sakti*. The performers are experts in the accumulation, amplification and transference of that energy. They will receive it and collect it during the different stages throughout the ceremony and, in the end, distribute it, in the form of blessings, oracles and advice, to the devotees.

The teyyam performance

The first stage of the *kaliattam* is the *thudangal*, or beginning. The performers, dressed only in a red waistcloth (*mundu*), go to the shrine of the divinity they are going to incarnate and, after ablutions and receiving offerings from the *karmi*, sing songs of praise to the deities, accompanied by percussionists. It is the signal to the community that the ceremony is about to begin, but it is also the commencement of the energy transfer process: the *sakti* of the divinity inhabits the sanctuary, impregnating the objects that are stored there. By singing to the deity in front of the shrine, the performer is calling the sacred power over him. At the end of the *thudangal*, each performer will receive from the *karmi* an oil lamp that was lit on the flame inside the sacred place. This is charged with much *sakti* and will accompany the performer during the process of transformation.

Transformation is the term used by the performers, not possession, trance, or any other, and it happens progressively, both physically, as the performer does his makeup and dresses up, changing his figure, and mentally, as he goes through a process of desubjectivation, dropping his ego and becoming the divinity. To be ready for the next stage of the ritual, the performer has to achieve the state of *ekacintha*, unified thought, focused mind. Inside the *aniara* (dressing room), next to the oil lamp brought from the sanctuary, and silently reciting some Hindu mantras, he will focus on the *teyyam* that he is going to perform, at the same time as he carefully applies the changes to his body.

The next phase of the ritual performance will be the *tottam* or the *vellattam*, depending on the deity to be venerated: some deities are propitiated with *tottam*, a song that narrates the myth and deeds of the divinity. Other deities are honored by *vellattam*, a form of dance with mimetic elements that gives an account of the associated myth.

Both for the *tottam* as for the *vellattam*, the performer presents himself with an "incomplete" outfit: already with some elements of what the *teyyam*'s elaborate garment will become, but still recognizable in its human form.



Image 3 – Thondachan Vellattam. Still frame from the documentary *Theyyam, The Dancing Gods*, directed by the author, 2016.

Each *kaliattam* is performed in a singular way and, sometimes, the same *teyyam* is performed in a slightly different way, depending on the tradition of the geographical area. But usually, before a *tottam* or a *vellattam*, the performer will receive from the *karmi* water for symbolic ablutions, gifts of sandalwood, rice, betel leaves, palm wine, or others, and again, a wick lit from the sanctuary flame. The *vellattam* will usually start with the *karmi* handing the god's weapons to the performer. At this stage of the ritual it is clearly noticeable the purpose of accumulation, transformation and transference of *sakti*: the performer continues to collect sacred energy, which he receives from the lamps, the weapons, the makeup process, the drinking, the various offerings, and from singing and dancing. Throughout the performance, in the various phases, the performer will distribute this energy, in offerings and blessings to the devotees, and oracles.

At the end of the *tottam* or *vellattam*, the performer retires to the *aniara* where the process of transformation continues. The outfit will be "built" on the performer, in a complex elaboration of cloths, props, branches, bamboo, leaves and flowers. The makeup will be "written" on the body and face. The *aniara* is a dressing room but also a sacred area of the precinct and these operations of dressing, adorning and makeup take place in an ambience of decorum, with constant recitations of mantras and, towards the end of the operation, often accompanied by percussion and by singing the divinity sacred songs.

The transformation will be accomplished, and the divinity fully present, when the *mudi*, the headgear of the *teyyam* is placed. This procedure, called *mudiyettu*, can be done inside the *aniara*, usually when the *mudi* is small, or in front of the sanctuary of the divinity, when it comes to large or very elaborate crowns. In either case, the performer will be seated on his ritual throne and, in the end, he will look at his image in a sacred mirror. This is a moment of great importance in the process: the performer realizes his transformation into the divinity, and the divinity recognizes his full incorporation into the body of the performer. This phase is called *mukhadarshanam* and is usually followed by bodily tremors and energetic expressions of enthusiasm.

Now the *teyyam* is entirely present, a living god. He will dance ecstatically and demonstrate his holiness

by extraordinary deeds: walking over large bonfires, sitting on burning coal, climbing up very tall trees, are examples of some *teyyams* actions. And he will distribute blessings, predict the future, and give advice to the believers. Sometimes the *teyyam* is asked to solve quarrels within the community, other times he should heal the sick, and every time he should guarantee rich harvests and good omens to the community.

The performance of each *teyyam* may last from about one hour to several hours. It is important to emphasize that the *teyyam* is a living god and must be treated accordingly by everyone, independently of economic or social status, or caste position. The deity is not to be confused with the low caste performer who lends him his body.

When all the ritual duties are performed, the *teyyam*, seated at his throne, has his headgear removed. At this, the divinity vanishes completely and, in his place, appears the low caste performer, who humbly salutes the officials of the temple and withdraws to the dressing room to finish removing the costume and makeup.

By this brief description of the ritual and its performance, I hope to make it understandable why the *teyyams* are so attractive to the social sciences: the reversibility of the social roles, the inherent transgressiveness, the ritualization of the social drama, the socioeconomic aspects of the tradition and the changes it has been going through, make it a fascinating field of study for sociologists, anthropologists, and religion studies, among others.

But it also presents very challenging issues to Performance Studies: the process of transformation and desubjectivation, the "focused mind", and the ritual use of dance and singing, are some of the features that may help to enlighten aspects of performative human behavior and deserve to be thoroughly examined.

Performance Studies

Performance Studies is the denomination for an academic field which Richard Schechner founded in the 1970s as an anthropological theory of performance and which took as its focus the peculiarity of the theatrical perspective on Cultural Anthropology. Schechner was particularly influenced by the Anthropology of Performance by Victor Turner (1987), with whom he extensively collaborated, and which can be summarized as the use of theater and drama analogies to frame the study of situations in Cultural Anthropology.

But Schechner did also integrate other views, for instance of Erving Goffman, who introduced performance analogies in the domain of sociology, and Clifford Geertz, who developed the path initiated by Turner to the point of focusing his anthropology research on the study of the rituals and aesthetic genres of a given culture, considering that these mirror the structure of the society that practices them. In 1988, in a brief commentary in *The Drama Review*, Schechner extended the field of investigation of Performance Studies to a virtually infinite scope, the broad spectrum

of performance: every human action can be understood as performance and studied as such. All the world's a stage, as Shakespeare would have put it, and since then Performance Studies have tended to increasingly focus on "cultural performances".

The Performance in a strict sense

Yet, studying any given phenomenon "as if" it is performance implies that performance is a particular reality, and that it deserves to be studied in its singularity. As Turner stated (1987), the significance of performance is that man is a self-performing animal, his performances are reflexive. Through it, the "*homo performans*" reveals himself to himself, coming to know himself better through acting, and offers others the opportunity to get to know themselves better, by observing the performances offered to them.

It is this ontological dimension that, in my view, justifies the investigation of performance in a strict sense, within Performance Studies, while not denying the importance of a broad spectrum definition. A strict concept of performance, that sets the focus on the structure and motivation of the action executed by one or more individuals, and carried out in a defined space and time, with an extra-daily character, and oriented, deliberately or spontaneously, to obtain a result or reaction from the participants or other individuals present in the same space and time, will lead to the question, as in Turner's title of a book chapter (1990): "are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?"

Considered within this narrow definition, performance is not ruled by logic. Therefore, its study requires a practical approach, based on observation and experimentation. That is, an ethnographical approach.

The Ethnography of Performance

An Ethnography of Performance will allow for concentration on some of the distinctive aspects of the performative action. From my point of view, these are related to its extra-daily character, and to the space and time bond. These distinguishing traits determine a condition that Turner named liminality, the position of what is on the threshold, neither inside nor outside, between two categories: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the position assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (1969, 95). A theater show, a music concert, or a religious ritual, are liminal situations. The competence of the performer is to provoke liminality, to juggle the space and time barriers in order to produce extraordinary circumstances. And, in this process, he is driven to a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975).

Flow is a highly focused mental state, in which action follows action, according to an internal consequentiality, which is not logical, nor reasonable, but practically effective, and intrinsically rewarding. To understand it, theoretical, rational, or hermeneutic approaches are inefficient. But the ethnographic perspective may allow us to experience it, as a means to its explanation. The Ethnography of Performance

follows the same steps of the apprentice performer: observation, copy, and experimentation.

And one of the first observations is that, in the flow there is a loss of ego, the "I" that normally functions as an intermediary between ego and alter becomes irrelevant (Turner 1987). This, I have been calling "desubjectionation" and, together with self-gratification, constitutes, in my opinion, the impetus for ritual performance, its autotelic motivation.



Image 4 – Kandenar Kelam shows his superhuman character by walking through high flames. Still frame from the documentary *Theyyam, The Dancing Gods*, directed by the author, 2016.

As we advance in the learning of the ritual performance, it becomes clear what Grotowski named as "techniques of flow", and the "objectivity of ritual" (1995): some elements, like the vibration of the voice in the songs, or the complex choreographies of the dances, or the rhythm of the music, may contribute to the induction of a state of flow. And this would be relatively independent from the cultural background of the practitioner.

This is not the occasion to deepen the discussion on the technical aspects of the ritual performance, or its range or scope, or its motivations. But I have to accentuate that, even if this study of the ritual performance is done with recourse to a strict definition, its conclusions may be applied within a broad spectrum concept of human performance.

Is the film documentary a useful tool for the Ethnography of Performance?

I presented the Ethnography of Performance as a practical and experimental approach to the extra daily live action, bound by space and time. I can add that performance has smell, taste, temperature, texture. I claim that performance has causality and consequentiality, but these only make sense to someone who is immersed in it.

Can film be used as a research tool, considering that there is so much of the invisible (and intangible) in the ritual performance? I have included in this text some still images, to assist with my description of the *teyyams*, and I can guess that, by now, the reader has already searched the internet for some videos of this ritual.

From its beginnings, ethnography has resorted to the use of images as a complement to the description of cultures and practices. If, in the early stages, it made

use of drawings, the popularization of photography made it an easy to use and indispensable tool for the field ethnographer. In 1942, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead published *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, which inaugurated Visual Anthropology and the discussion on the epistemological and heuristic issues related to the joint use of verbal and visual communication media.

From my own experience, image media, photographic or cinematic, can be used at two different stages: as a notebook, a memory instrument that allows us to recall details of the performance while reflecting on, discussing or writing about it; and as narrative, used to describe the performance or some of its details to different kinds of audience, associated with verbal (spoken or written) media. I will try to give account here of some of the issues raised in both situations.

The film as a notebook

It is easy to understand that the filmed account of a ritual performance is not a ritual performance: it lacks many elements that can only be experienced at the live event. But, as I need to recollect the events in all details, to be able to reason about it, or to describe it, the film may reveal itself to be a very useful tool. I do not learn new facts, I just review information that I have perceived before, when my eye directed the camera. At this, it is worth mentioning the distinction referred to by Rose (2001), between vision and visuality. Vision is what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing; visuality refers to the way in which vision is constructed: how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing. The filming eye is conditioned by visuality and the resulting film may sometimes contradict the more vivid recollections of the immersive experience.

The collection of research films is a practice that dates back to the beginning of cinema, in the late 19th century (Regnault, 1900), mainly with the objective of gathering data and sharing it with other scholars, or using it for educational purposes. But, as far as I am concerned, these data are functional only for my own use or under my supervision, because they are conditioned by my visuality and are a small part of the reality that I could experience at the moment of its gathering. This is why I call it “film as a notebook”.

When conducting informal interviews (Whitehead 2005), I can show excerpts of my film to local informants and ask them to explain or comment on what can be seen there. This allows a reduction of my verbal contribution, therefore a diminution of my influence in the formulation of the explanations. Informants tend to give “correct answers”, i.e., to say what they think I would like them to say, basing that understanding on what they hear from me. My task, in order to collect emic³ information, is to get people to express themselves in their own terms (Bernard 2002) and using the film as a notebook that can be shared, may be useful for this purpose.

But not only with local informants. Recently I needed the opinion of an expert musicologist on some aspects of the ritual drum percussion. Using clips of my field

films, we had enough material to allow my colleague to give me a reasoned opinion, even if the ritual practice was unknown to him.

As with a notebook, the ethnographer has to be as discreet as possible with the use of the camera: it is well-known that individuals modify their behavior when they are aware of being observed (Landsberger 1959). When the observation is done through a filming camera, the observer effect is amplified: the subject is not only aware of the observation, but also of the long-lasting testimony of his actions, and may drastically change his behavior.

The use of research film as a notebook, an analogy proposed by me, is not yet generalized. But it will become more and more frequent, with the contribution of hands-free micro cameras and action cameras that allow effortlessly filming in very discreet conditions.

But the main use of filming cameras in the ethnography research field is still connected to the production of ethnographic documentary films.



Image 5 – Vayanattu Kulavan Teyyam (Thondachan). Still frame from the documentary *Theyyam, The Dancing Gods*, directed by the author, 2016.

The Ethnography as a narrative: the documentary film

Ethnography is always a narrative, a description of otherness. The extent of the creative freedom of the narrator is a topic of wide controversy (Lave 2011), which we do not need to engage with now. It is enough to establish the evidence that my descriptions of the *teyyam* rituals are different from the accounts of any other ethnographer. Also, cultures are neither static nor homogeneous, and their depiction will depend on the individuals portrayed, and on the moment and context of the observation. Thus, a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) will reveal more of the circumstances of a culture, but will rely on the subjective explanations and meanings given by individuals.

But, even if Clifford Geertz was “favored by a literary talent unique in the social sciences” (Verde 2009, 70), his anthropological writings never had to stand up to serious comparison with the works of literature. Likewise, the ethnographic film does not have to be looked upon as an aesthetic genre, but as a medium of communication within the humanities and the social sciences. Its subjectivity does not prevent it from being factual, documental.

Of course, this is valid only when the communication is made within the academic context and it is for the

safeguarding of accuracy that Jay Ruby (2000) proposes a strict definition of ethnographic film as that produced by anthropologists for anthropological purposes. On the other hand, Heider (1976) argues that all films about people are ethnographic, and even films that are not about persons are made by someone, so we can learn something about the culture of the individuals who made them. The problem with this very inclusive categorization is that it is useless.

As a matter of fact, many years ago the ethnographic documentary became a standard genre within the cinema industry, with the declared intention of being educational or to popularize anthropology and ethnography and, on most occasions, with the more trivial purpose of responding to the audiences' desire for exoticism. In the 1920s Pathé Studios employed anthropologists from Harvard to give advice on their *People and Customs of the World* (Durlington and Ruby 2011), but mostly the filmmakers engaged in this type of documentaries were not academics and there is no evidence that these films were ever used in a scholarly context.

Technical advances have brought more agile cameras and allowed for more relevant research films. The title of a film from 1941 by the pioneers Mead and Bateson is in itself a programmatic manifesto for Visual Anthropology: *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures* compares Balinese, Iatmul (New Guinea) and American cultures in a twelve minute film.

But it is only in the 1960s that it became possible for small crews to produce synchronous-sound location films (Durlington and Ruby 2011), and that permitted Jean Rouch to shoot *Chronique d'un été*, with the collaboration of Edgar Morin and the influence of avant-garde Soviet films and old ethnographic documentaries. In this *cinema-vérité* (cinema-truth), which intended to expose the culture of the Parisian population, the filmmaking process was shown to the interviewed and those were asked to give opinions on the production. This collaborative approach to the ethnographic film, initiated by Rouch, had a breakthrough with the Navajo Film Project by Sol Worth and John Adair (1973), when some Navajos were taught the technology of cinema without the conceptualization usually connected to it, and asked to make films about their culture. Other projects, in Alaska, Brazil, or Australia, followed the same path: to show the culture through the eyes of the subjects. The film is no longer about the "other", it is a film about the self, made by another, not western acculturated.

This raises a new set of questions, related to what are the constraints that determine this narrative. When an ethnographer gives a description, he has the obligation to display his subjectivity (by publishing his notebooks, for instance) and to aim for an emic attitude. But, even if cultures are neither static nor homogeneous, they will be represented by a specific individual in a particular moment, and we do not know what the motivations of the subject are when he describes his own culture and society. We risk having a less factual and documentary narrative. Is it still an ethnographic documentary?

On the ethnographic film, I think that we have to agree that it is an ethnographic description, ruled by

the specific norms and standards of the methodology, and resorting to the use of cinematic media. The balance between verbal and visual media depends on the aim of the document and on the style of its author, but I do not recall an ethnographic documentary made only with images and with no text.

In general, we can say that the product will be modulated mainly by the recipients of the narrative: if aimed at a wider audience, the film will be more pedagogical and illustrative, while, if aimed at an academic audience, it will tend to highlight methodological issues and subjects related to the state of the art in the humanities and social sciences. It depends on the subjective point-of-view of the filmmaker but, unlike cinematographic works of art, ethnographic film will be factual and documentary, and not staged.

The documentary film on *teyyam*

Erik de Maaker, a pioneer on the *teyyam* ethnographic documentary (1997) thinks that film, due to its two-dimensional visual representation, associated with sound, can describe events that are beyond the realm of writing (2006). I could add exactly the opposite: without a verbal text, the images and sounds of the ritual are abstract, devoid of context. And all together, text, images, and sound, compose a pale portrait of the vivid experience of the ritual performance.

There are many films on *teyyam* made by locals; ranging from amateur to professional quality, from short to long, spontaneous or with a structured storyboard and project, they surely present an opportunity to try to see the ritual from the native scope. But, understandably, they omit bits of information that, because they are so evident, are unnecessary for the locals, but would be fundamental for my perception of the cultural practice. And here resides the importance of the study of the "other": strangeness highlights the fundamentals.

Trapped in a double possibility of misunderstanding, not fully comprehending the image of culture expressed through indigenous eyes, and at the risk of making gross errors in its own interpretation of culture, ethnography is still one of the rare possibilities to learn about the "other" and, what is really most important, through it learn about myself. Seduced by the promise of fame and glory, brought by the big audiences, the ethnographic film needs to avoid the golden aura of art and resign itself to its condition as a tool for academic research and communication.

The ethnography of performance allows for a cross-cultural study of a mode of action that is, in itself, ontological, and must be researched through experience and practice. The ethnographic film on the *teyyam* ritual is always a challenge for the one who makes it and for the one who sees it, and it can be an instrument and give useful clues to the research process. But performance is live action.

Notes

¹ After being exhibited at a few festivals, the film was

published in 2018 by the *Journal of Anthropological Films*, Vol 2, nº 1 and can be seen at

<https://boap.uib.no/index.php/jaf/article/view/1369>.

² A single exception is Devakkutti, worshiped exclusively in the temple on the island of Thekkumbad every two years, where the deity is incorporated into a woman from a specific family of the Malayan *jatis* (Anju, 2014). The exceptionality has generated a lot of interest and some controversy about the categorization of Devakkutti as a *teyyam*.

³ Emic, a neologism coined by Kenneth Pike; the emic approach tries to reason with the same values that the local population uses.

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