# Reviews

## Applied Visual Anthropology: Reflections from the RAI Film Festival 2017

The Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival, March 29–April 1, 2017 (Watershed, Bristol, United Kingdom).

Reviewed by Erminia Colucci

The RAI Film Festival is a biennial four-day event 'dedicated to the celebration of the best in ethnographic, anthropological and archaeological film-making from around the globe',[1] which is organised by the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in partnership with the Center for Visual Anthropology (University of Southern California Dornsife). The programme is structured around three strands consisting of films shortlisted for five main prizes: the RAI Film Prize; the Basil Wright Prize; the Wiley Blackwell Student Prize; the Material Culture and Archaeology Prize; and the Intangible Culture: Music-Dance-Performance Prize. Two other strands offer a range of parallel events, including special interest screenings, specialised workshops, forums, and master classes (such as, Trends in Ethnographic Film-Making in China and in Latin America). This year a special event was also organized to celebrate the centenary of the birth of one of the forefather of cinéma-vérité, Jean Rouch (figure 1). The 38 films screened covered a wide range of topics, from whale hunters of the Faroe Islands to an old Chukchi legend called 'The Maggot Feeder' to the microcosm of people's stories played out inside Italian public baths.

Since 2015, the RAI Film Festival has taken place at the Watershed Cinema, Bristol. I was invited to attend the 2017 edition and to write a review from an applied visual anthropology (AVA) perspective. In the words of Sarah Pink (2009: 6), one of the leading proponents of this field, AVA involves 'using visual anthropological theory, methodology and practice to achieve non-academic ends'. In a previous book, Pink (2006a) indicated that AVA differs from what she calls 'academic visual anthropology' because of its problem-solving component, which aims to create research-led social interventions. Furthermore, AVA is characterised by a collaborative approach and is generally 'client'- or 'user'-driven rather than motivated by theoretical or methodological questions deriving from academic practice. Finally, Pink (2006a: 89) argues that AVA projects 'are neither simply applied projects that use visual methods, nor visual anthropology projects with an applied effect'. Rather, applied visual methodologies draw from both sub-disciplines and often also from other disciplines, thus the interdisciplinary nature of AVA.

With this understanding in mind, I approached the RAI Festival with these queries: What is AVA in practice? Does ethnographic documentary have a role to play in applied anthropology (and vice versa)? Searching for clues, I watched several films at the Festival that could potentially fall within AVA/ ethnographic documentary. One of these films was *Employment Office* (Anne Schiltz and Charlotte Grégoire, 2015), a 74-minute observational documentary consisting of a recording of a series of interviews (in total one hundred interviews conducted over a five weeks) of people of different genders, ages, ethnicities and life journeys who try to access this office to find employment. The film shows the complexities of fitting into a system that might have no space to accommodate and support people who are vulnerable, like the physically disabled, ex-criminals, the mentally unwell or those with drug/alcohol issues. It also shows the incongruence of the laws related to worker rights and benefits with the immigration law (e.g. one of the participants, a Belgian citizen, discloses that he is not applying for temporary jobs because the immigration law determines that he needs to earn 1,300 euros a month in a permanent job to be able to reunite with his spouse and child from Morocco). The participant suggests a potential use of the camera as (what drawing on Pink could be considered) a tool

Figure 1: Celebration event for the centenary of Jean Rouch (photo by the author).

for social intervention when he looks at the camera and states that 'this has all been filmed in camera'. This statement provides a clue about the power of the camera to bear witness to a social phenomenon, but it also left me wondering whether shedding light on an issue (in this instance, an issue already represented in well-distributed films such as *I, Daniel Blake* [Ken Loach, 2016]) is an intervention per se. In other words, is the use of ethnographic documentary in this context a tool for documenting a problem or for addressing a problem?

A similar question (i.e. whether documenting a problem means contributing to solving the problem, and whether the latter is an applied use of the documentary) can be asked with regard to *Lampedusa in Winter* (Jakob Brossmann, 2015). This (ethnographic?) documentary displays the multiplicity of tragedies suffered by asylum seekers.[2] The five thousand residents of the small island of Lampedusa – which is 127 miles and 70 miles away, respectively, from the Ital-

ian and African coasts – become unwilling witnesses of deaths at sea and, when trying to help those who survived the journey, bang their heads against European refugee laws. At the discussion session following the screening, an audience member asked about how the film was accepted in Italy and whether it had any impact there (figure 2). As the directors were not present at the Festival, this question remained unanswered. The reality is that impact is very hard to measure and follow, as most of those who make films do not really know *how* their films are being used *by whom*. This unanswered question left me wondering whether it is the impact and the use of a documentary outside of academia that makes it an applied work. If this is the case, visual anthropology documentary projects to be 'labelled' as AVA should therefore be able to provide an impact case study that shows how the documentary has been used and how it has contributed to social change.

Another point of reflection around AVA emerged during the Q&A with the producer for the 95-minute film *Twenty Two* (Guo Ke, 2016), which focuses on Chinese 'comfort women' during the Second World War and on 22 of the two hundred thousand victims forced into sexual slavery by Japanese soldiers who were alive at the time of filming. Towards the end of the film, the retired teacher, who had been providing some sort of support (not explained in the film) to the Chinese and Korean 'comfort women', indicates regret at having made these elderly women revisit their pain by sharing their stories of multiple rape for several media outlets: his objective of having the Japanese government make a public apology and provide some financial compensation had not been fulfilled. Watching this film encouraged me to consider whether disclosing an issue and increasing awareness is sufficient to prompt action and result in an intervention. At various points in the film, the women express difficulty in disclosing their stories

and even state their unwillingness to do so (a statement that raises ethical issues that were unaddressed in the film or following discussion). One of the audience members asked the producer whether this was a curiosity-driven documentary or a political film because of its strong emotional impact. This audience member then asked whether this film had been released in Japan. The distributor was not aware of a Japanese release and replied that the documentary was made as a document (i.e. to capture these women's stories before they died). Although this, as many other documentaries on sensitive issues, is an extremely evocative and powerful film, from an applied anthropology perspective we are left with a sense of uneasiness about any practical outcome resulting from this film (and others like it). One could argue that sometimes making a film, being involved in the creation of the visual recording and dissemination of one's story of abuse and violence, is an intervention per se thanks to the empowering



Figure 2: Panel discussion during the Festival (photo by the author).

effect that film can have on its protagonists (Colucci and McDonough in press). While this is certainly the case of some films I have previously watched, such as *We Want (U) to Know* (a participatory documentary envisioned, filmed, acted and co-directed by Cambodian survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide and their grandchildren in 2009),[3] in other cases the anthropologist/researcher/film-maker might ultimately become a sort of (patronising?) gate-keeper who takes away the empowering opportunity that collaborative/participatory ethnographic documentary might have.

I had the feeling that, to some extent, this was the case with the documentary *Travel* (Nick Mai, 2016), which is an ethno-fiction made in collaboration with eight sex-worker women who, as part of the film production, took part in a workshop to share stories and create a generic script that was then used by actresses (some of whom were sex-workers themselves) to improvise during the shooting. At the Q&A, the researcher/film-maker discussed having made decisions around identity and disclosure to 'protect them', but could this also be disempowering? I have first-hand experiences around this issue thanks to several discussions with ethics committees and funding agencies around confidentiality for people with mental health problems, which partially motivated the development of the Guidelines for Ethical Visual Research Method (Cox et al. 2014) developed by the Visual Research Collaboratory, of which I am a founding member.[4] For instance, for the participatory video project 'Finding our Way'[5] (see Colucci and McDonough in press), I and the other co-coordinator had to argue to give the people with mental health problems involved in the project the 'right' to use their real names in their film if they wished to do so. While we were able to achieve this objective for this project, I was ultimately unable to receive approval from a Sri Lankan ethics committee (although the project had already been approved by the University of Melbourne ethics committees), which requested that Sri Lankan women victims of domestic/family violence be allowed to be involved in the ethnographic documentary project only if their husband or other male family figure approved of their involvement.

Interestingly, although *Travel* was part of a research project, it did not go through a full ethics process; instead, 'the methodology went through some review' as vaguely stated by the director. As observed by Pink (2006b: 18), 'applied visual anthropology raises ethical issues unaccounted for in existing ethical codes for applied or visual anthropology'.

AVA, because of its interdisciplinary nature and by virtue of the fact that, in trying to solve a problem, it is bound to deal with sensitive matters and 'pressing human issues' (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006: 186), requires an adaptation of the ethical principles and standards developed in applied and visual anthropology. This might take the shape of a combination of applied and visual anthropology principles with those of the collaborating disciplines (Pink 2006b).

This was the case for the ethnographic documentary *Breaking the Chains* (2015), which is part of an initiative that I started a few years ago called Movie-ment.[6] This AVA project, based in Indonesia, deals with people with severe mental illness who are subjected to practices of physical restraint and containment such as caging and chaining, and has undergone reviews by both anthropology and medicine ethics committee members at the University of Manchester and received ethical clearance. This film is widely used in mental health and human rights education and training. For example, it is used to train psychologists in Indonesia in capacity-building, it is used in advocacy programmes for mental health professionals and government officials in several low- and middle-income countries with similar restraint/confinement practices (e.g. the University of Melbourne Leadership programmes), and it is used as resource in various university courses (e.g. the MA in Global Mental Health at the University of Glasgow). *Breaking the Chains* has been screened at various discipline- and non-discipline-specific events and festivals in the United Kingdom and overseas. Extracts of the companion text have also been published in medical and psychiatric journals (see Colucci, 2016). Nevertheless, it has been rejected by various ethnographic documentary and visual anthropology festivals and events (or shown in parallel screening platforms such as in the Film Festival Library section at RAI 2017). On one occasion, it was personally communicated to me that this decision was based on 'ethical grounds', with no further explanation and no reply when I argued that it was perhaps more unethical that various researchers (including anthropologists) had previously seen mentally ill or 'possessed' people chained, caged or as victims of other abuses during their fieldwork in various countries but, with only a few exceptions (e.g. the medical anthropologist Ursula Read in Ghana, 2009), had turned a 'blind eye' to it.

On the cover of the DVD of *Breaking the Chains* that the RAI distributes,[7] it is stated: 'This film researches an important topic (faith-based/traditional practices for mental suffering) that is under-researched in medi-

cal anthropology and is a rare example of applied visual anthropology in the field' (figure 3). The scant presence of AVA projects in ethnographic/visual anthropology film festivals that I have experienced since my involvement in this field has been mirrored in the exclusion of accounts of AVA projects both within visual and applied anthropology (Pink 2006a). As Pink (2006a) has noted, visual anthropology methods are not even mentioned in the sets of methods listed in standard applied anthropology texts and the applied strand is usually excluded from definitions of visual anthropology. This is in spite of the fact that visual anthropology was applied right from the start, with 'colonial photography' produced from 1860 to 1920 being considered evidence of the early years of what has become visual anthropology (see Pink 2006b). This is also in spite of the fact that scholars considered forefathers and mothers of the

discipline, such as Margaret Mead, throughout their careers were both energetic supporters of visual anthropology and champions of applied anthropology (Pink 2006a, 2006b). Gregory Bateson's work is also a 'good example of the application of an anthropology of the visual in work designed to produce interventions' (Pink 2006a: 83). Similarly, John Collier dedicated most of his career to applied visual projects (including developing the photo-elicitation method which became quite popular outside anthropology) but, as Pink highlights (2006a), this has largely gone unreported in existing literature. When I attempt to understand the reason for this neglect, I wonder whether the marginal presence, if not rejection, by 'scientific anthropology' that both visual and applied anthropology have experienced in their respective past histories (see Pink 2006b and Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006) has resulted in the reciprocal striving of



Figure 3: Erminia Colucci with her past supervisor, Professor Paul Henley, and the co-convenor of the EASA Applied Anthropology Network, Pavel Borecky (photo provided by the author).

both fields to not 'pollute' their boundaries in an attempt to be accepted and recognised by mainstream anthropology. Furthermore, the limited sharing of practices and experiences between scholars/practitioners in AVA (Pink 2006a) –which I have personally experienced when looking for resources for my AVA projects in mental health and migrant/refugee studies – might be slowing down the development of AVA as the 'fourth strand' of visual anthropology proposed by Pink (2006a). Finally, I wonder whether the 'unhelpful split between applied and academic anthropology' (Podjed et al. 2016: 59) that seems to apply also to AVA (see, for instance, the distinction in Pink 2009: 11–12) has represented a barrier to its acceptance within the largely academia-driven visual anthropology/ethnographic documentary festivals I have attended so far, including this year's RAI Film Festival.

Nevertheless, as also observed by Pink (2006b), there seems to be an increasing use of visual methods of research and representation within applied anthropology and a recognition that an (engaged) visual anthropology has an enormous potential to be a tool for social intervention (Pink 2006a). The workshop on 'visual anthropology interventions and climate change action' by Mike Poltorak at the last RAI Festival might also represent a promising change for the future of visual anthropology. I certainly believe in and advocate for a larger use of applied visual methodologies and theories in medical and health sciences and across other sectors including development, education, humanitarian work, social advocacy and industry (e.g. technology and design). Thus, as the RAI urged anthropologists – over a decade ago – to pay more attention to the applied role of the discipline (Pink 2006a), I urge for future editions of visual anthropology/ethnographic documentary film festivals to take more account of the value and potential of AVA projects and create a space for the exchange of AVA practices and experiences that will, with no doubt, contribute to establishing AVA as a sub-discipline of academic and non-academic anthropology as well as to establishing its interdisciplinary relevance.

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## Notes

1. https://raifilm.org.uk.
2. The same issue was depicted by other documentaries such as the Oscar-nominated short documentary titled *4.1 Miles* (Daphne Matziaraki, 2016), which was filmed on the Greek Island of Lesbos.
3. http://www.we-want-u-to-know.com.
4. http://vrc.org.au/about-vrc.
5. http://www.vtmh.org.au/publications-and-research/finding-our-way.
6. https://movie-ment.org/breakingthechains.
7. https://www.therai.org.uk/film/film-sales/breaking-the-chains.

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### *Youth in Postwar Guatemala: Education and Civic Identity in Transition*

Michelle J. Bellino, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017, ISBN 978-0-81358-799-8, 270 pp., Pb: $34.95.

Reviewed by Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani and Marta Paluch

• Part of the series: *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Reviews of Anthropological Works by Non-Anthropologists*

In this multi-sited ethnography, Bellino compares social studies classes across four Guatemalan secondary schools, focusing upon how they teach the history of Guatemala's civil war: 30 years of armed struggle between guerrilla organisations, fighting for a more just society, and a repressive military state. The Commission for Historical Clarification reported two hundred thousand people killed, a million internally displaced and one hundred and fifty thousand forced to flee to Mexico. Some 93% of the deaths were at the hands of the state's forces, and the vast majority were indigenous Mayas. The Commission concluded that 'agents of the Guatemalan state carried out acts of genocide against the Mayan people', (cited in Grandin et al., 2011 p. 393) but the perpetrators have not been brought to justice.

In addition to the 20 months of fieldwork behind this study, Bellino draws on previous research carried out in Guatemala, demonstrating an in-depth knowledge of the history of the armed conflict and the current socio-political situation. In the 'urban elite' school, students uncritically repeat racist stereotypes of indigenous people, which have remained unchanged since the nineteenth century. The teacher encourages them to 'think like a state' (66), and questions the value of the UN and Church

reports on the conflict. In contrast, the teacher in the 'urban working class' school uses participatory techniques to encourage analysis and discussion. While she aims to educate youth who will work for change, the daily violence that the students face is a constant reminder that the end of the armed conflict did not bring peace.

The 'rural poor' school is situated in a community which is threatened by the opening of a mine. While protesting the environmental damage that mining will bring, people nevertheless apply for jobs with the mining company. The armed conflict awakens memories of suffering, and the discourse of the culpability of both sides is accepted. The most harrowing of the four cases is the 'rural indigenous' boarding school for Mayan youth. While this school seeks to train community leaders, the politically motivated murder of a recent female graduate makes involvement in political action a high-risk choice, undermining the commitment of the young people. In this context, Bellino proposes that pessimism becomes a protective strategy whereby 'hopes for the future sink when confronted with the scale and nature of the forces that stand in the way of change' (218).

As well as recognising how schools play a crucial role in constructing the past, 'institutionalizing particular knowledge and sanctioning omissions' (23), Bellino demonstrates how young people make meaning out of history through both informal and formal educational exchanges embedded in broader sociocultural contexts. Youth do not merely inherit memories of violence and dreams of peace from their parents and teachers; they actively interpret, reconstruct and locate themselves within these narratives, even when they are 'intentionally silenced' (8).

Given how the teaching of traumatic histories is a global concern, Bellino's findings are valuable for researchers and practitioners working in post-conflict societies across international contexts. They have applied relevance for history educators in particular, as Bellino demonstrates, among other things, the value of pursuing spaces for cross-context inter-youth dialogue in the construction of historical memory. Responding to claims that countries recovering from conflict may require particular ways of addressing the wounds of the past, such as engaging in a period of historical silence, Bellino illustrates how 'even if the war could be erased from public memory, legacies of violence and division would continue to mar society and structure power equities in the present' (5). She makes a compelling argument for educators not to silence history, given its role in influencing not only young people's expectations of self and oth-