

# “I DO NOT WISH TO SPEAK ABOUT / ONLY TO SPEAK NEARBY”:

Deconstructing the Anthropological Gaze on Film



By Lauren Elliott, May 2015

This research text is a response to CIRCA Projects' work with the artist Mario Pfeifer ahead of a presentation of his work 'Approximation in the digital age to a humanity condemned to disappear' in October 2015.

*(Above) Still from 'Approximation in the digital age to a humanity condemned to disappear' by Mario Pfeifer.*

# ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM PRACTICE HAS EXISTED SINCE THE BEGINNINGS OF MOVING IMAGE ITSELF, BUT THE INVENTION OF FILM PROBLEMATISED ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRACTICE, A DISCIPLINE PRIMARILY CONSIDERED A SOCIAL SCIENCE...

Anthropological and ethnographic filmic practice is essentially the study of the 'other'; the study of those different to us (both the filmmakers and the intended audience). Issues of morality and ethics have perpetually beleaguered filmic ethnographic practice since its inception - what started as visual recordings for scientific purpose had now transgressed into a widely accepted art form, blurring the line between the two by making a scientific practice more accessible and in turn, entertaining. Once this anthropological practice became accessible, an array of new ethical concerns were conceived; now these films had an audience. The cinematic problem of ethnography meant that it began that often such filmmakers sought spectacle and narrative over genuine sociological research.



Upon the release of Robert J. Flaherty's 'ground-breaking' 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*, Western audiences were stunned by his images of native Inuit people spearing whales and building igloos in the Hudson Bay. The film has long been dubbed the first feature length documentary and the first feature-length ethnographic film. But Flaherty's dubious methods in his portrayal of the Inuit People of the Hudson Bay bring such accolades into dispute. By staging many scenes within the film, employing actors and false declaring the death of the film's protagonist, *Nanook of the North* was the one of the earliest films to merge anthropological research and entertainment filmmaking, thus creating a new set of problems in the way anthropological documentary was received. Such a films' spectacularly contrived methods only undermine those which it represents, by sensationalising the lives of indigenous peoples, trivialising such persons and alienating the viewer further from the subject onscreen.

*(Above) Still from Nanook of the North (1922). Dir. Robert J. Flaherty.*

Anthropologist and filmmaker Asen Balicki defends Flaherty's contrived 'reality' in his essay, *Reconstructing Cultures on Film*, in which he states, "The second approach in anthropological filmmaking admits right from the beginning that there is no such thing as the objectivity of the camera. A film is always a construction. Anthropological films are no exception, they are similar to monographs which are selective syntheses of cultural data." [1] Balicki calls into question the notion that anthropological films must adhere to common notions of representational purity, and argues that Flaherty's processes were justified in trying to make his representation of the Inuk people more accessible to a Western audience. As cinema advanced throughout the first half of the 20th century, as did anthropological documentary, which began to draw wider audiences with the invention of television. With these new audiences came the further romanticisation and exploitation of indigenous peoples for the purpose of Western entertainment. Anthropological film has continually been burdened by issues surrounding the gaze of the filmmaker (and in turn, the viewer, who often leads a very different life to those on which they gaze). Ethnographers often sought to pageant and sell an exotic 'otherness' to a largely Western audience, which in turn recolonizes those it represents. This 'colonizing gaze' is problematic for the subjects of such films, who now became entertainment for a Western audience. Since the majority of ethnographic practice focuses on those living in poverty, do these films thus become 'poverty porn', made to excite a distant audience on the tribulations of indigenous peoples, or can the film's initial intentions of educating its audience remain? To combat this recolonization of indigenous peoples through anthropological filmmaking, several artists have sought to create works which instead question the common tropes of visual anthropological practice and to represent foreign subjects in a deferential manner.

The documentary sub-genre aptly termed porno-miseria [2] emerged in 1970s Colombia as a way of categorising an increasingly popular form of documentary filmmaking (particularly for television) in which extreme poverty in Latin American countries would be emphasised, and thus, commodified to be sold to a distant audience. The inception of this type of filmmaking was based on producing images of poverty with no accompanying political discourse, thus rendering the images meaningless 'poverty porn', intended to titillate a Western audience's sense of worldliness when viewing such images.

In 1974, Colombian filmmakers Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina filmed *Agarrando Pueblo* [3], as a reaction to this commodification of poverty as a result of the popularity of porno-miserabilist filmmaking in Latin America. The film follows a group of predatory German television producers filming in Bogotá for their porno-miserabilist television documentary, *Whose Poverty?* They seek the most abject subjects for their 'anthropological' recordings, change their subjects' stories in order to appear more despondent, and thus, more appealing to the vampiric audience watching the documentary at home. The producers prey on their poverty-stricken interview subjects by having them rehearse lines and set up their shots in such a way as to achieve the most desperate image for their audience. At one point, when setting up an interview, a filmmaker says to his subject, "Okay, you're not a carpenter – you're a cobbler".



## QUE ES LA PORNO-MISERIA?

El cine independiente colombiano tuvo dos orígenes. Uno que trataba de interpretar o analizar la realidad y otro que descubría dentro de esa realidad elementos antropológicos y culturales para transformarla. A principios de los años 70, con la ley de apoyo al cine, apareció cierto tipo de documental que copiaba superficialmente los logros y los métodos de este cine independiente hasta deformarlos. Así, la miseria se convirtió en tema impactante y por lo tanto, en mercancía fácilmente vendible, especialmente en el exterior, donde la miseria es la contrapartida de la opulencia de los consumidores. Si la miseria le había servido al cine independiente como elemento de denuncia y análisis, el afán mercantilista la convirtió en válvula de escape del sistema mismo que la generó. Este afán de lucro no permitía un método que descubriera nuevas premisas para el análisis de la pobreza sino, que, al contrario, creó esquemas demagógicos hasta convertirse en un género que podríamos llamar cine miserabilista o porno-miseria.

Estas deformaciones estaban conduciendo al cine colombiano por una vía peligrosa pues la miseria se estaba presentando como un espectáculo más, donde el espectador podía lavar su mala conciencia, conmovirse y tranquilizarse. AGARRANDO PUEBLO la hicimos como una especie de antídoto o baño maiaacovskiano para abrirle los ojos a la gente sobre la explotación que hay detrás del cine miserabilista que convierte al ser humano en objeto, en instrumento de un discurso ajeno a su propia condición.

Luis Ospina y  
Carlos Mayolo

Realisateurs de  
"Les Vampires de la Misère"



In the final minutes of *Agarrando Pueblo*, the film exposes itself as a fraud; In an effort to unmask the vampirism of those who create porno-miseria film, Mayolo and Ospina have deluded their audience into believing that they're following this vulturous television crew. The filmmakers are interrupted in their filming of *Whose Poverty* as a seemingly deranged man takes over the scene and shouts "Bloodsucking Vampires! You only come here to make people laugh in faraway places..." A struggle ensues and a police officer and the head producer of the film intervenes, who attempts to bribe the man to continue his erratic behaviour in order for the spectacle to be further filmed. The unnamed man takes the money and wipes it on his anus. The scene becomes even more heated when the man gets out a large knife and chases the marauding television crew out of the compound. He finds a film canister which has been dropped on the ground and proceeds to remove and destroy the film, whilst repeating the invasive questions which the filmmakers had just before asked their subjects, literally deconstructing the vampiristic act of filming those living in poverty, and deconstructing the idea of anthropological film itself. As the scene reaches boiling point, a voice is heard out of frame shouting, "Cut!" The man immediately asks, "Was it okay?" We think that we're watching something that we're not; Mayolo and Ospina interview their actors as the credits of the film roll.



In their text, *Que es la porno-miseria?*, Mayolo and Ospina state that in the creation of *Agarrando Pueblo* they wanted to "open people's eyes to the exploitation behind the miserabilist cinema which turns human beings into objects, into instruments of a discourse foreign to their own condition". By doing this, Mayolo and Ospina have thus excoriated the nature of sociological filmmaking itself, criticising the common devaluation of privation and the scientific, artistic and entertainment value attached to such practice.

*(Above) Still from Agarrando Pueblo (1977). Dir. Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina.*

Mayolo and Ospina have not been the only ones to deconstruct the anthropological gaze in such an unapologetic manner; in 1983 Trinh T. Minh-Ha produced her first essay film, *Reassemblage*. Shot in rural Senegal and consisting mostly of images of women at work, Minh-ha states that she does “not wish to speak about, only to speak nearby...” the images onscreen. Minh-ha not only questions, but criticises the ‘colonial gaze’ and seeks not to fall into the “habit of assigning meaning” upon such images. In doing so, Minh-ha allows her audience to consider the restrictions of their gaze and the common pitfalls of ethnographic representation. She continues to attack the expectations of anthropological film: “The man on the screen smiles at us while the necklace he wears, the designs of the cloth he puts on, the stool he sits on are objectively commented upon.”



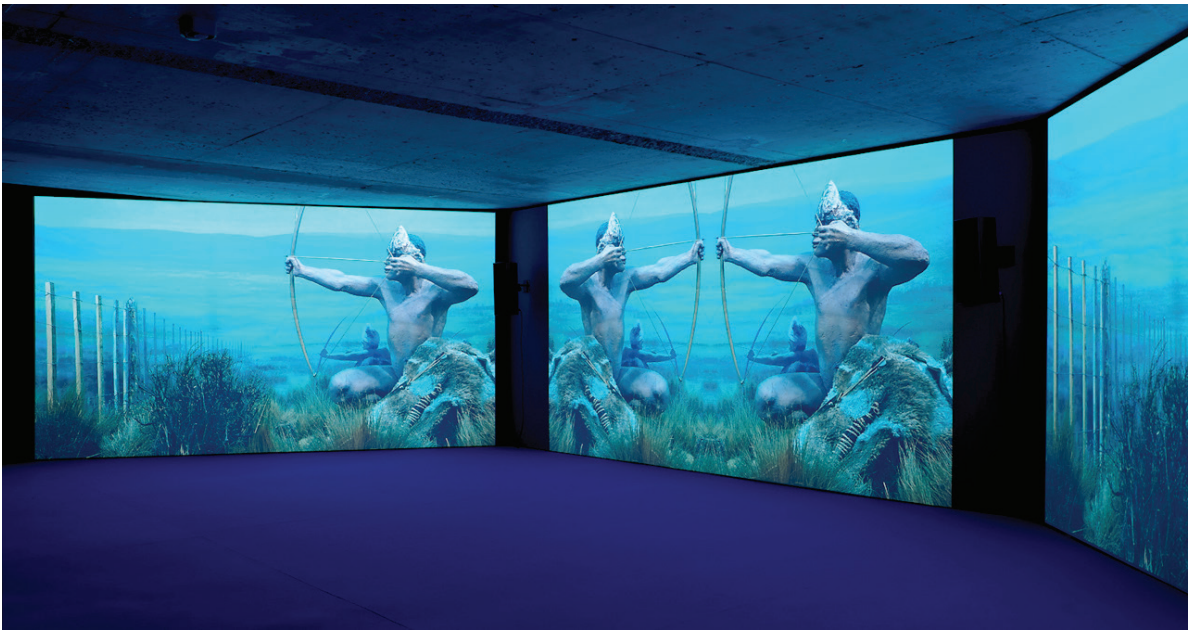
*(Above) Stills from Reassemblage (1983). Dir. Trinh T. Minh-Ha.*



As a result of Minh-ha's fear of "speaking about" her subjects for her own academic discourse or the satisfaction of the films' viewers, *Reassemblage* becomes a self-reflexive piece about anthropological practice, rather than an anthropological artefact in its own right. The common thread between films such as *Reassemblage* and *Agarrando Pueblo* (and other films which have similarly criticized the anthropological gaze) is that the films themselves, whilst appearing to be ethnographic experiments at first glance, stop being so and actually seek to deconstruct the anthropological gaze and ethical concerns associated with such filmic practice. The backlash against the cinematization of poverty and the lives of indigenous cultures has in turn spurned some of the most thought-provoking and radical 'anthropological' films to date.

Nevertheless, filmic ethnography can remain an important tool in documenting peoples and places in a manner which draws attention to a humanitarian cause in a self-aware manner. In Mario Pfeifer's upcoming exhibition with CIRCA Projects in South Shields, 'Approximation in the digital age to a humanity condemned to disappear', Pfeifer looks at the Yaghan people of the Isla Navarino, on the southernmost tip of Chile (and the inhabited world). Pfeifer seeks to explore a different form of representation of native peoples "in moving images towards cultures that have existed long before the imperialistic gaze." Pfeifer's representation of an indigenous people, threatened with obsolescence, is unconventional in many aspects; In *Approximation*, no explicit explanation accompanies the images we view onscreen – there is no narration or onscreen text to govern the way in which the audience consumes and understands the work, so similarly, Pfeifer wishes not to 'speak about' those who appear in his works, which in turn allows no forced conclusion to be drawn by the viewer. Pfeifer's impartial representation of those he shows onscreen is no coincidence; he is conscious of not passing or providing a platform in which to pass judgement of those who appear in his works. He lived for several months on the Isla Navarino, yet he conveys as little narrative information as possible, in a conscious effort not to recolonise those he shows. No conclusions are drawn, no stories are told, no onscreen interviews are conducted, only images of daily life and labour are shown, here liberating the audience from the traditional tropes of anthropological film, which often naively seek to help us understand a culture through film. Instead, Pfeifer wishes for his audience to engage with the images onscreen in their own way, rather than in a way in which they're told to.

The installation piece further distances itself from conventional anthropological methods of representation in its aesthetic nature. The installation has a decidedly contemporary aesthetic – the 3 channel installation uses 4K Cinema and Surround Sound which provides a stark juxtaposition to the images of everyday life which we see onscreen, thus transforming a culture far removed from 'modern' technology into the present and in turn engaging with an old culture using today's tools. This notion is furthered by the use of sound in the work. The musical score for *Approximation* was created by Kamran Sadeghi (a member of the Soundwalk Collective), who took anthropologist Martin Gusinde's early field recordings of Yaghan traditional chanting (which were recorded onto Wax cylinders), as a stimulus for his work. However, the soundtrack is sonically more akin to Techno than any form of indigenous Patagonian music, here again questioning the conventional methods of anthropological representation by using new methods in the representation of an old and dying culture.





One can compare Pfeifer's work with that of Ospina and Mayolo, in that it adopts a self-reflexive and discerning approach to anthropological practice. In *Approximation*, Pfeifer depicts life on the Isla Navarino in the Tierra Eel Fuego region of Chile and examines the lives of the descendants of the indigenous Yaghan people who have inhabited the area for thousands of years. The region has been highly examined by anthropologists, who've recorded the history of Yaghan culture in anticipation of their lineage fading into memory. Pfeifer shows digital renditions of early anthropological photographs to the ancestors of those documented, presents the nightlife of Puerto Williams and explores the island's industrial labour and plant life in an endeavour to examine the disappearing culture of the Yaghan community in the present, as an act of resistance to the common "rearview-mirror mentality" of anthropological practice commonly conducted towards this particular culture. In doing so, Pfeifer vehemently questions (and in his own way, transforms) the traditional discipline of anthropological representation through his nonpartisan method of looking at places and peoples.

When conducting anthropological research, the gaze of the filmmaker holds massive importance in the how the film's subjects are represented. Imperialistic penchants dominate much of anthropological film, but many filmmakers are now acknowledging and deconstructing the problematic nature of directing their camera at that which is deemed exotic and 'other'. By doing so, such filmmakers subvert conventional expectations of anthropological documentary by instead turning their concentration onto the ethics of the practice itself and its facilitators. However, as world poverty remains, misery cinema continues to thrive in our television programming and thus contributes to commonly skewed perceptions of foreign lands and peoples. In order to combat this, anthropological research must persevere in challenging the authority of the filmmaker's gaze when representing those with whom they are dissimilar, and seek to preserve the integrity of the practice by acknowledging the problematic nature of representing those which one considers 'foreign'.

#### FOOTNOTES

[1] Balicki, Asen in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyer, 1995.

[2] The term porno-miseria in English roughly translates to porno-misery or miserabilist cinema.

[3] Agarrando Pueblo had the English title of 'The Vampires of Poverty'.

– Published by CIRCA Projects, June 2015. [www.circaprojects.org](http://www.circaprojects.org)