

Symposium Paper: Shooting Freetown: Shared Anthropology & Collaborative Media in Urban Sierra Leone – Kieran Hanson

Review by Arjang Omrani

The film introduces one filmmaker, a singer and a music video producer in Freetown the capital city of Sierra Leone as the director's final project of Master studies in visual anthropology. Each of the protagonists of the film are talking about their professional life and how they deal with the relative issues and challenges they are faced with as well as their desires.

Beside the statements of the subjects, the film shows the backstage of a scene, as part of the filmmaking and shot by the filmmaker (Arthur), and two video clips, which each, was made in collaboration with each of other subjects of the film (Paps and Alfred).

Rouch's concepts of Shared Anthropology and ethno-fiction, as Hanson states, were the primary inspirations for making this film, what also he remarks as the inevitable indication for judging almost all discussions about shared anthropology.

Watching the film and by reviewing the presentation, the very same fundamental questions that target my dilemmas in Anthropology and its (Audio-visual) representation are raised, and I am about to share some of them (as much as the limitation of this paper allows), and since Rouch's works and concepts were presented here as the point of reference, I will also follow this tradition to use some examples and making comparisons to them.

In the age of the rapidly growing communication technology, physical and virtual mobility, the anthropologist is no longer the major representative of the “other”, as many other resources are busy with their own projects of presentation of otherness. TV and so many other mass multimedia broadcasting constitutions are also involved in this process. Each of these projects, to some degree, contains anthropological aspects as much as they investigate the human life conditions.

At the very same time and as we are aware of, those who have been the typical subjects of anthropology are also speaking on behalf of themselves through the same mediums, what was one of Rouch's ultimate wishes, and the fundamental approach of Shared Anthropology in order to democratizing the discipline.

Following this (certainly not new) argument, I have critical concerns about the legitimacy of films like “Shooting Freetown” in context of modern anthropology, as when, according to Hanson's presentation, people in Sierra Leone are engaged with media technologies which are no longer out of their reach and access, and if they are able to build up concepts, to film and to edit by themselves, then what is the role of the anthropologist to picture them?, or letting them picture themselves in anthropologist's film? Especially when his role and active presence (beside his filming and editing) and relationship with his collaborators is not evident and clear in the film. The audience could only notice his voice while he was introducing himself and giving some information at the beginning of the film and those rare circumstances when he is addressed by the participants.

Long term presence in the fieldwork in order to get more insight into people's life-world, is one of the most outstanding characteristics of anthropological and ethnographical projects, what distinguishes these works from other attempts to represent humans life condition. Rouch himself as we know had spent many decades among the people whom he was collaborating with, gaining experiences that helped him to grasp and to film better the spontaneous and improvised moments that he believed, were the moments of revealed reality occurring in his cine-trance and ethno-fiction films.

I think Hanson, most probably because of the lack of time he had (a Master project with a limited time), was not able to get into the deeper relation with the collaborators, although this doesn't let us underestimate the responsibility of the anthropologist for what s/he represents, publishes and broadcasts.

I think this limited time could at least be used focusing on one person. This certainly would have spared more time and concentration on gaining deeper insight into the subject of the project and having more time in the film to show. What surely (in my opinion) has to be accompanied by transparent reflection of his own presence as filmmaker/anthropologist doing this project, sharing self-reflexively the intentions, questions and dilemmas led him doing this project with his protagonist as well as the audience as part of the shared anthropology.

Audio-visual apparatus, especially the use of camera is a highly critical tool in doing projects of creating knowledge. This medium has indeed a strong potential to be used as a mode of representation, enables us to provoke the sensorial and emotional alongside with the rational and analytical perceptions and eventually leads us to the subjective reality. But it can also have a strong potential of creating a false conception of reality, stronger than many other mediums, as we are bore witness in highly manipulative ways applied in different mass media and news productions, and of course in some ethnographic films. The ease of using camera enables the filmmakers to record as much footage as they can, without spending enough time in the fieldwork to learn and grasp more about the places and people they are filming.

At the end and as a conclusion, I stress the importance of our self-aware and constant critical view of our own definition and approach to anthropology and subsequently to the projects we are conducting, conceptually and methodologically. Shared Anthropology as a general concept, can create environment for such a self-conscious and self-reflexive anthropology, and Shared Anthropology in the 21st century, I believe invites us, to acknowledge more inter-subjectivity in our communication in order to share the “Anthropology” with its classical subjects of study.

Selected Bibliography:

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