

Symposium Paper: Shared Vision and Creativity: the Participatory Ontology of Christmas Birrimbirr (Australia) – Jennifer Deger

Review by Simone Pfeifer

Australian anthropologist Jennifer Deger presented the film and exhibition project *Christmas Birrimbirr* (Australia), which is based on a shared practice between film, visual art and Yolgnu ritual (Australia). In her presentation, she focused on a shared visuality, history of vision and trans-cultural experience as part of the participatory encounter of creating films. Deger’s lively and exciting paper opened the way during the symposium for a different way of thinking about the notion of participation in participatory video and cinema.

Together with Fiona Yangathu and Paul Gurrumuruwuy, two senior Aboriginal performers as well as visual artist David Mackenzie, Jennifer Deger formed Miyarrka Media in 2009 – the collective behind the project. Showing three short sequences of different video material, she explained the complexities of the Christmas Spirit project, a project intended to capture feeling, experiences and Christmas through three different forms of (re-)presentation:

- Firstly, the exhibition *Christmas Birrimbirr*, which consists of a 39-minute, three-channel video installation, symbolically structured around three graves. In addition to this centerpiece, the exhibition includes photographs and other symbolic objects (for a review and short interview film with the two aboriginal co-directors talking about the vision behind the project see Tinapple 2011);
- secondly, the festival film *Manapanmirr, in Christmas Spirit* (Gurrumuruwuy et al. 2012) has more explanatory commentary by co-director Paul Gurrumuruwuy, which was shown at the Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival (GIEFF) 2012;
- and finally, a long (approx. 3-hour) version of Gurrumuruwuy’s film without commentary for the Yolgnu community and family members participating in the film project.

Both the film and the exhibition video installation start by showing in full frame the *wulma* clouds, a sign for the start of the wet season. For Yolgnu, these clouds also mark the beginning of Christmas time – a special period when Yolgnu commemorate, think and talk of the people that passed away and share their sorrow through grieving and crying. The film and the installation continue with the sounds and images of singing Christmas songs. Both show how family and community members prepare for the celebrations of commemoration and mourning, like clearing and decorating the graves, looking at and touching the photographs of the deceased, and preparing food. The climax of the film is a ritual on Christmas Day, celebrated especially for the project and film, that goes through mourning and loss to reconcile with joy and happiness (Gurrumuruwuy et al. 2012).

Jennifer Deger’s work shows different levels and complex constellations of participation. On the one hand, Deger described the process of co-creation between the four collaborators as a seemingly ideal constellation. She drew a very positive picture of the project’s realization as well as the satisfaction with the project of all co-directors (Deger 2013). On the other hand, Jennifer

Deger also mentioned contestations and negotiations, which occurred throughout the realization of the project and are continuing with regard to distribution. An issue of great debate is, for example, the question of where and in which context to show the exhibition and the film. Though it might not be obvious to all viewers of the exhibition and film itself, in Australia where filmic representations of Aboriginal culture are understood to be inherently political and always potentially problematic, a consideration of power relations, colonial history and personal aims must become explicitly part of such encounters and negotiations in such a process.

Furthermore, in order to make a film on Yolngu terms, the project was realized with the participation of family and community members, aiming first and foremost at a Yolgnu audience, even though it would be seen by a much wider audience. Deger describes the project as one involving forms of shared visuality and aesthetics in which all participants of the filmmaking process were working together to find an adequate aesthetic form and representation for Yolngu ritual and cosmology (Deger 2013). In the time available, Deger couldn't explain these points in detail and develop her theoretical argument further. Elsewhere Deger discusses indigenous aesthetics and Yolngu forms of mediated visuality in more detail (2006, 2007); part of almost 20 years of research out of which the *Christmas Birrimbirr* project evolved.

The film is crafted mainly according to Yolgnu socio-cultural context and visual history – creating a filmic social space for a shared feeling of Christmas within the community. At the same time, this space and experience is expanded to all Non-Aboriginal people through the exhibition and the festival film. Yolngu and the co-creators of the project want to make the trans-cultural experience possible for all, giving this special depth of feeling for the dead celebrated during Christmas as a Christmas gift to everyone (see Miyarrka media interview film clip shown in Tinapple 2011).

The presentation of the project showed that there are different aspects of participation on all levels of the filmmaking process: not only the production process and the content and aesthetic form of the piece or artwork itself, but also its distribution and circulation are part of that participatory process. All three representational forms of the project have their own life and ways of circulation. Here, Deger also touched on the rarely discussed issue of participatory audiences and how diverse viewers from different cultural backgrounds with their own personal histories appropriate and experience the work of artists and anthropologist in a participatory way. Visitors and viewers are invited on a trans-cultural journey, to share the experiences, feelings, and depth of Yolgnu Christmas and to incorporate those into their own lives; ultimately to bring Yolgnu and non-aboriginal people closer together. As research on the appropriation of the exhibition and the film by viewers and audiences is not yet complete, the notion of 'participatory audience' remains vague and there is space to discuss the concept, also in the terms of methodology.

On a final note I would like to relate Jennifer Deger's paper and project presentation to the overall topic of the symposium. After the keynote speakers' broad approach to participatory video and cinema referring to concepts of participation as varied as David and Judith MacDougall's and Jean Rouch's, I was asking myself: are there any ethnographic films that are not participatory? Of course all ethnographic films have a participatory element to them, but to

label them participatory films and thereby emphasizing this as the main feature of ethnographic films, seemed to overstretch the category in a not very useful way and didn't help me to understand the concept. For me, Deger's paper grasped this notion in a broader sense and showed that there is more to participatory film in each stage of the filmmaking process. By discussing her project and presentation, I wanted to point to some possible categories, levels and degrees of participation within participatory film (video or cinema). Yet there remains the question of how exactly to distinguish the notions of collaboration, participation and shared experiences that are all part of the described project and all seem to be variants of the same approach. Does it make sense to distinguish different genres and different levels of participation within participatory video and cinema to contribute to the overall discussion of what exactly is participatory film and cinema? I'm sure these debates will continue in the planned collaborative publication of the symposium and the edited volume will provide for more clarity.

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References:

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