Symposium Paper: Participatory Video in Bali – Deconstructing Video to Make it More Participatory? – Kevin Thompson and Sang Putu Kaler Surata

Review by discussant Monika Sorensen

When David MacDougall introduced the concept of participatory cinema (1975) he was as alwaysabsorbed in the task of understanding and representing culture and anthropological knowledge. His idea was that inviting the subjects to be participants in the production of ethnographic films could help you achieve this understanding as a filmmaker and at the same time give the film more authenticity. This research method can convince filmmakers as well as audiences that the film brings them close to the reality of the people in the film.

In the meantime anthropologists and other scholars have begun to use cameras as means to empower people/a community. This is perhaps a little misleadingly called participatory video yet it consists of direct camera training and sometimes editing training. Through this process people more or less take over the film themselves and it is hoped this enables them to voice their opinion and raise debates concerning their living conditions. The emphasis is on the process more than on the film product itself.

The definition of which filming projects are genuinely participatory can be debated endlessly but more important are the implications and how we go about doing these allegedly participatory projects. Some projects can be a mix of the forms and the project presented by Kevin Thompson and Sang Putu Kaler Surata began as the first but has developed into the last as it becomes clear their agenda is to make local Balinese aware of the cultural heritage of the Balinese landscape through the use of visual media like cameras and lately also websites. As scientists, respectively a landscape architect and an ecologist, they worry about the rapid uncontrolled growing of the cities at the expense of the rice fields that characterizes the beautiful Balinese cultivated landscape. This threatens not only the ecological balance but actually also the tourist industry, which is both part of the threat as well as threatened, as the very same rice fields are one of the greatest attractions.

Kevin and Kaler took us into a very long journey to describe the development of their project. They involve their respective students who again train young middle school children in video sessions in which they learn to represent themselves and other locals like family and farmers in short video films. In this trickle down system of knowledge the middle school children are taught to map and draw landscape, they learn to make storyboards and to record video with compact cameras. The university students however edit according to the storyboards. Though Kevin and Kaler say they want transparency around their agenda they also talk about not imposing their own bias too much developing what they call 'soft steering'. Nevertheless Kevin and Kaler have taken many decisions as to who participate (students and school children), by what means (mapping and camerawork), about what (landscape), to what end (raising consciousness). The project is selffunded through the university and school systems and dependent on these systems but not on external

organizations or national funding. There seems to be several beneficiaries. The school children become aware of their local environment by entering it and by listening to the narratives of local people. Students learn to facilitate a process. Kevin and Kaler have their jobs and get to know more about local perceptions. Kevin and Kaler tell that surveys have shown that some kind of empowerment does happen the children are deeply engaged in the process and have their focus turned to local issues. This is in line with how the other speakers experience their projects. The idea of a lasting effect and 'sustainability' concerned most speakers and also Kevin and Kaler. However, public screenings of the children's films have not resulted in the expected long term development of a local debate on the fate of the rice fields.

Hence they have invented a new participatory approach working with 'co-generated local knowledge platforms' which is their words for a website with an interactive blog. Instead of contsructing films they deconstruct films. The children can post photos, soundscapes, footage, maps, and writings about landscape structuring these elements in the visual space of the website and opening up for audiences actively choosing a way through the information. A website enables the children to reach decision makers and peer groups nationally or internationally just by sending them a link and they can receive a message instantly on the website. Whether this will open up for more dialogue with relevant decision makers is still unanswered. But certain groups like technologically unconscious (elderly) people might get disempowered or lost in this process. And by the time the children have grown up and become the future decision makers the rice fields are gone according to the statistical extrapolation of how the red urban areas steadily engulf the green rice field areas visually shown in the beginning of the presentation. No doubt the use of Internet/social media gives young people an easy possibility quickly to share information and knowledge to a large amount of people. To organize a film screening is much more time consuming and the audience more limited. To make a good film also involves more training and skills. The deconstruction of the material on a website hides the unprofessional quality of it and makes it easier for nonprofessionals to participate because they do not have to master the narrative and structuring process e.g. editing is. On the other hand the ability to tell a story may be exactly one of the empowering skills that can enable people to enter a dialogue and express own thoughts. Watching a film together is also a social event that can mobilise and bring about a collective feeling. Yet we often tend to forget to understand the audience as participants and to develop their participatory skills along with the producing participants who made the film.

New questions emerge and I am sure, Kevin and Kaler reflect on these in their new abstract: How can we analyze structures of power on the Internet? What kind of information can be shared on the Internet compared to in films? To what extent can the Internet enhance or perhaps damage local knowledge and aesthetics? And the question I perhaps found most interesting at the Symposium: How can we align our research with their needs? – and does the use of Internet give us new challenges and/or possibilities in doing this?