

Symposium Paper: Participatory Cinema: Exploring Forms of Anthropological Knowledge –

Mihai Andrei Leaha

Review by Christos Varvantakis

Mihai Andrei Leaha, opened the third day of this years' GIEFF symposium, in a panel focusing on the *praxis* of participatory/shared cinema (chaired by Peter I. Crawford), with a lecture entitled: 'Participatory cinema: Exploring forms of Anthropological Knowledge' – and further subtitled: 'The Crafting of Ethnographic Film from the Perspective of a "Possible Worlds" Theory.' If the title seems long and somewhat complicated, Mihai in his presentation did in reality a quite straightforward – and rather sincere – theoretical suggestion.

Like many young filmmakers, he has encountered the limitations of the truth claims of the cinema of the real– best expressed in the dreadful remark of Dai Vaughan (1999) that, 'film is always about something whereas reality is not'. He is not put off by this realisation however, neither he turns a blind eye on it – he rather chose to directly confront it. To do this, Andrei draws from literature theory (in which he has an academic background). He introduces the ideas of the *possible worlds* and the *fictionalist* theory, developed by Romanian scholar Neagota (following Pavel), which use as a departure point the realisation that 'man is a fictionalizing being, transforming the real according to his own anthropological coordinates' (Neagota 2003). By introducing this theoretical suggestion into the discussion of ethnographic film and cinema of the 'real', Mihai wants to swift the focus of analysis into how ethnographers are crafting realities through film – what are the impacts of their chosen methodologies on the films they produce and the truth claims they make through their narratives.

For Mihai, participatory is a *method*, and not just an analytical category or an epistemological abstraction. He is a filmmaker, and his urge to understand participatory cinema, stems precisely from his need to understand the processes and the effects of his filming and editing. A practitioner of participatory in his own video works, he counters the question of '*what is*' participatory cinema, with the question 'how does it work?' Being conscious of the 'banality'

of participatory video (i.e. its excessive use in reality television), as well as of the dangers involved in importing theories from one academic field into another, he seeks to understand how the particular methodology of participatory filming constructs its fictional world for its viewers. Instead of measuring the objectivity of ethnographic films or composing delicate definitions of participatory cinema, it might be more productive, he suggested, to look at ‘how does participatory cinema, as a mode of ethnographic film creates a believable world for the viewer, or in other words, how does the viewer copes with the *narrative pact* that the participatory film proposes?’