

<http://somatosphere.net/2015/11/swamp-dialogues-filming-ethnography.html>

## Swamp Dialogues: Filming Ethnography

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By Ildikó Zonga Plájás

In recent anthropological film practice we see a shift from established visual ethnographic paradigms focused on discursive representation (Crawford 1992), towards the realm of interdisciplinary cooperation and experimentation. Working with filmmakers and artists has a long history in visual anthropology, however recent theoretical debates open up new terrains for cooperation with various fields like science and technology studies, bio-medical sciences, forensic science, and architecture. As attention is directed towards the corporeal experience that informs intellectual understanding (Suhr-Willerslev 2013; Postma 2006; MacDougall 2006) the role of visual perception and representation is re-valuated once again. In this post I am going to interweave clips from my film and text to make a case for post-representational anthropology, that is, an anthropology that does not reveal the truth, but which advocates for different and intersecting ways of engaging with the worlds we inhabit.

I spent several months in the Romanian Danube Delta<sup>[1]</sup> conducting fieldwork about the manifold ways people engage with “wilderness.” Upon returning from the field, before setting pen to paper, I started to work with the audio-visual data and to compile a narrative in image and sound. The anthropological film *Swamp Dialogues* (2015, 53 min.) thus became part of the analysis and the outcome of the research. Though the text and images of this ‘filmic thesis’ are aimed at an academic audience, it might still be useful, or perhaps necessary, to emphasize that the film is not an imprint or a document of reality, and neither are the 36 hours of footage which I recorded in the Danube Delta. Also, the film is not an illustration of the written analysis, and therefore it is not subordinated to the text. As MacDougall puts it, “visual anthropology may offer different ways of understanding, but also different things to understand” (MacDougall 2006: 220). Throughout the fieldwork I used audio-visual methods, not only because of ethnographic knowledge they generated, but because they enriched the possibility of the ethnographic field itself.

Whether approached as text or as object, the visual medium of film functions through implication, visual resonance, identification, and shifting perspectives that differ from the principles of most conventional

anthropological writing. Film necessarily involves the audience in a heuristic process of meaning creation. A filmed field encounter can be communicated to viewers in many places, adding to the validation and reliability of findings as well as providing a more visceral kind of knowledge than academic writing tends to deliver. *Swamp Dialogues* brings the sensorial aspect of being in the Danube Delta to the audience, making almost palpable the cold, the foggy mornings, and the hardship of the fishermen but also the beauty, humour, and vitality of daily life in the marshlands. A camera, if used in a reflexive way, can make apparent that the fields we work within are not out there, but assembled through the documentary process.

The themes of my analysis, which later became the building blocks of the storyline for the film, emerged from the same anthropological curiosity which shaped other fieldwork decisions. This happened sometimes accidentally even while filming. In the village C. A. Rosetti for example, I was accompanying Tanti Dumitra for the umpteenth time to walk the cattle at dawn. In this specific morning, the foggy weather and beautifully filtered light made me take the camera with me. Working with the cows alongside my hosts for already two weeks gave me confidence with the animals, which were not running away, but obeyed my voice and long stick. This morning, however, I was carrying an unknown object with a big furry microphone, and paid more attention to filming than to herding. For this reason the cows took a slightly different path, leading us into a highly polluted region of the fabled nature reserve.

I did not know about the garbage dumped in the fields and I happened upon it while I was filming Tanti Dumitra. When I noticed the backdrop of my carefully framed image, the focus of the frame shifted to the waste. "Do they dump the garbage here?" I asked a few minutes later, after we had walked on. In the editing, I placed this question immediately after the visual encounter, while the viewer is still looking at the garbage. This is a unique moment of the film when I invite the audience to participate in my wonderment. Here, the camera becomes not only a tool to provoke or catalyse field-interaction, but an exploratory tool to literally co-create the situations that then demand comprehension.

What could be a better medium to highlight the communicative aspect of ethnographic understanding than the audio-visual 'records' of field-situations? 'Dialogues' in the title reflects the dialogical setting of fieldwork, but also 'being in dialogue' with different scientific discourses and the multiple layers of intentions and interpretations emerging from the field site.

Pels notes that the “romance of harmonious collaboration is [...] an ethical injunction that intervenes in, rather than represents, the methodology of an ethnographic research project” (Pels 2014: 230). Perhaps while doing away with the imperative to represent (a singular truth), we can still keep alive the problem of representation—that is, the problem of how we advocate for different ways of knowing.

It would be hypocritical to claim that *Swamp Dialogues* was produced in a harmonious collaboration. Many of the people I have met refused or were just not so keen on being filmed. This happened often when talking to fishermen who were using illegal plastic nets or fishing without permits. Although I sometimes inadvertently filmed people who were obviously not happy with what I was doing, I always turned off the camera and never used any footage without consent. But more importantly: throughout the entire process of the research I did my best to lay the cards on the table. Everyone knew there were risks for all involved since we could not always anticipate the directions we would go.

The ethnographic film produced by this research gives room for reflection upon the ways field interactions shape ethnographic knowledge, emphasizing the deeply relational character of the understanding that ensues. At the same time it offers a medium where no verdict has to be given, where the contradictions and incongruities can be present within the same filmic landscape. In this sense, it evokes the complexity of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve characterized by the “polytheism of the scattered practices” (Mosse 2005) elaborated in the written part of the thesis.

The evocative character of the film is also performative, bringing into being a film-object which functions as a contribution to the mainstream environmentalist discourse, while also offering a platform for ethnographic debate that makes room for confusion and misunderstandings. Due to its sensorial richness, *Swamp Dialogues* adds to the quality and complexity of perception and understanding representing an intervention through which new insights are materialized. But above all, it is a testimony to how nature and environment are constantly produced by different practices, including the dialogue provoked by the anthropologist-filmmaker.

## Note

[1] The Danube Delta—“last European sanctuary”—is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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## Swamp Dialogues film synopsis:

The Danube Delta in Romania – the ‘Last European Sanctuary’ – is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While major efforts are made to protect biodiversity, the plight of local communities is largely overlooked. Social scientists claim that the traumatic nature of the swamp bears heavily on the villagers’ lives. But is Nature really to blame? *Swamp Dialogues* is based on extensive field-research in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. Through a ‘argument montage’ built entirely on cinematic language the film entails an anthropological reflection on knowledge production in social sciences.

## Festival selections:

- Beeld voor Beeld, Amsterdam (the Netherlands)
- DEF, Ljubljana (Slovenia)
- FIFEQ, Montreal (Canada)
- PELICAM, Tulcea (Romania)
- NAFA, Warsaw (Poland)
- ASTRA, Sibiu (Romania)
- Marburg International Ethnographic Festival (Germany)
- Jean Rouch International Film Festival, Paris (France)
- EthnoFilmFest, Munchen (Germany)
- Athens Ethnographic Film Festival (Greece)

**Awards:**

- Best documentary in the Student Section: ASTRA Film festival Sibiu (Romania)

[Ildikó Zonga Plájás](#) studied anthropology and cultural studies in Romania and Hungary, later graduating in Visual Ethnography at Leiden University, the Netherlands. After her studies she has been a guest lecturer at Leiden University, and is currently working on a new research project at the University of Amsterdam. This research examines how visual technologies produce Roma people as a phenotypic 'other.' *Swamp Dialogues* is her first anthropological film.

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