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Media-medium: Between Ethnography and Communitarian Cinema

Media-médium: entre la etnografía y el cine comunitario

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Abstract
Through the ethnographic account of a series of field experiences lived during the production of communitarian cinema with indigenous peoples, the author proposes to explore the implications of cinema beyond the final cut of the work and inquiries about the cinematographic process and the different dimensions of the social which cross through it. At the end, she refers to the expansion of the film outside its temporal and physical limits stating that films are in continuous realization and that their projection is a performance which completes them.

Keywords
Communitarian Cinema, Indigenous peoples, Ethnographic Fieldwork, Chaco, Amazon, Visual Anthropology.

Resumen
A través de la narración de una serie de experiencias etnográficas de campo vividas durante la realización de cine comunitario con indígenas, la autora propone explorar las implicancias del cine más allá del corte final de la obra producida, e indaga sobre el proceso cinematográfico y las diferentes dimensiones de lo social que lo atraviesan. Los ejes no son ni la cámara ni su operador, sino del proceso mayor de abordar un proyecto cinematográfico comunitario. El final del artículo hace referencia a la expansión del film fuera de sus límites temporales y físicos, a la idea de película en continua realización y a la proyección como performance que completa al filme.

Palabras clave
Cine comunitario, indígenas, trabajo de campo etnográfico, Chaco, Amazonía, Antropología visual.

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To the memory of Patricio Taish,
filmmaker and friend shuar

Introduction

We have heard more than once the story of how anthropology and filmmaking have been closely linked from their origins (De Brigard, 2003, Marcus and Ruby, 2011, Ruby, 2000, Ardèvol, 1994). It could also be argued that cinema is based on the analytical enthusiasm of some photographers - such as Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne Jules Marey - for inquiring about the movement of both animals and humans. In the first half of the 20th century, anthropologists who considered the camera as a tool for research saw in the mechanical record of cinema a fruitful way of preserving moving images of rituals and gestures of men from distant cultures, while the modern West that threaten to take everything (Bateson and Mead, 1942). Mead, in his text Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words ([1974] 2003), issued a kind of proclamation in which he asked the anthropologists to take the cameras to record hours of unedited rushes that could serve to meticulously review, again, gestures and behaviors of indigenous peoples. He proposed film recording as a mechanical observer, a sort of "rescue" cinema of a world that seemed to vanish.

> Just as the instruments of greater precision have taught us more about the cosmos, a good record of these precious cultural documents can illuminate our knowledge and our appreciation of humanity "(Mead, [1974] 2003, p.).

From the so-called "crisis of representation" in anthropology -from the mid-1970s-, new voices began to question these uses of the camera, calling into question the supposed authenticity of their record or, better, the establishment of asymmetrical power relations that were generated through the cinema and the imposition of discourses on a generally mute "other", in the bosom of a discipline born from the bowels of the colonialist project of the West (Piault, 2000, Ruby, 2000, Rony, 1996, Nichols, 1997).

Throughout these ups and downs - between critical reflection, uncritical production and absorbed experimentation-different anthropologists approached

the audiovisual sector by incorporating the figure of the filmmaker [2]into the discipline, to found, between diffuse limits and multiple confluences, what we call visual anthropology[3]. The camera imposed itself as a tool for anthropological study, and the film - the minor child of the academic text - began to claim greater status (Mead, [1974] 2003, Ruby, 1991). In that future, a space of reflection was created on the recording of image and sound and on the social relations - actual and historical - that are woven in the making of these records.

Visual anthropology progressively incorporated new perspectives and interests to discuss the bonds that are established in the construction of the images about the "others" - fixed or moving, with or without sound -, to gradually dissolve the distances between the researcher subject and the investigated subjects. Likewise, the camera will change hands, to record images constructed by the "others" and with the "others." A possible starting point for this was the initiative led by Sol Worth, John Adair and Richard Chalfen, when in June 1966 they taught the Navajos (diné) to use 16mm cameras (Worth and Adair, 1970 and 1972). However, beyond the inaugural milestone meant by that experience, what happened did not cease to be an isolated event without further immediate development. In Latin America, however, the use of video by indigenous peoples emerged as a social movement and assumed in many cases a critical political position, with a view to self-determination and cultural revitalization; under the name "indigenous video", an important current was formed around the audiovisual realization throughout the American continent (Salazar and Córdova, 2008; Wortham, 2004 and 2013; Salazar, 2009; Schiwy, 2009; Córdova, 2011; De Cavalho et al., 2013; Soler, 2017; Zamorano Villareal, 2009).

I am interested in analyzing here the experience of cinematographic realization as a process in which the conceptions about the cinema and the anthropological work are displaced and transformed. This analysis seeks to leave aside a notion of cinema about others, or made by others, to think of the audiovisual space as a means of social, political and intercultural interaction.

2 A term that Jean Rouch preferred to that of producer, since it combined the work of the ethno-cinematographer, who works alone, without equipment (Colleyn, 2004, page 387).

3 Also called audiovisual anthropology. I keep here the *visual* adjective, because it has a greater historical depth and, therefore, provides the possibility of tracing its antecedents.

Media-medium

Much of the anthropologists have managed to free themselves in a hyperdescriptive way of performing ethnography, which proposed to reinforce the distance between the investigator and the investigated, and in which the camera, in search of a scientistic objectivity, served to deepen this distance. One of the key figures in that break was the anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch, who showed total freedom in his films; "Manipulated the sequences to create not a film of investigation, but a true cinematographic work; knew how to use the trance that the film itself caused "(Boudreault-Fournier et al., 2016, pp. 38-39; own translation). In his classic film *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955), the camera seems to go into a trance and dissolve the distances between the operator and those who are filmed, and allows "camera-medium" for spirits, both living and dead, to enter into the scene. From this idea and this gravitation of images I conceived the title of this article, *Media-medium*, with which I seek to inquire about the cinema and the different dimensions of the social that interweaves, not focusing on the camera and its operator, but in the greater process of approaching a community project catalyzed by the cinematographic realization.[4]

Through the story of a series of experiences during my work in the ethnographic field, I suggest possible ways of exploring the dimensions of cinema as an experience, beyond the materiality of the produced work. These dimensions of the social that arise in the cinematographic work have to do with how the links are built within each community with which I work, the relationships between age groups and the roles of authority that are manifested and that enable or not the possibility of audiovisual realization. This will be exemplified by two different experiences, from which the moments of the unique conception of the scripts and of the filming are narrated. On the other hand, it is argued that beyond the final cut of a film, the film can

4 There is no unified term that refers to the appropriation of audiovisual tools by indigenous people. In Brazil, for example, Indigenous video is spoken (Carelli, 2011); in the United States, of indigenous media (Ginsburg, 1991), and in Mexico, of indigenous video (Wortham, 2013). In New Zealand, Maori simply speak of cinema (Gauthier, 2008), although it is true that their achievements are closer to industrial cinema. As Claude Chavrol once said, "a cinéaste ne mérite ce que du moment où il sait qu'il fait" (Aumont, 2011). In that sense, the term "cinema" can be anchored in a knowledge, a decision or an implementation of a film project which opens up a wide space from the creative point of view. Likewise, we do not neglect the important historical roots of the term "indigenous video" in the Latin American context.

be conceived as open or unfinished, in constant process of construction, as a work that is transfigured and becomes performance in a projection, and which implies the putting into act of sensitivities, aesthetic and imaginary decisions. In this sense, cinema as a process under construction, beyond its materiality or final cut, can be analyzed as a medium, for its ability to bring into contact multiple dimensions of the social and multiple beings.

Since 2014 I have been working in film workshops in indigenous communities, first with *shuar* from the Ecuadorian Amazon and, since 2015, with indigenous people from the Argentinean Chaco, mainly *qom* (tobas). I have taught cinema alone and as a team, I collaborated in community filming and spent a lot of time editing on the ground, side by side with those who came to contribute their ideas. From time to time I had occupied the role of ethnographer, took field notes and interviewed people about the experience of filming and about the many other issues that were being addressed to us, and then I was once again a pawn in the game of filming, as an example, I had to hold a sound rod for hours.

Generally, an audiovisual project is approached from a script or initial idea; then the pre-production is started, financing is sought and a technical team is formed, and then the execution of the filming, the assembly and the postproduction of image and sound are undertaken. When it comes to community and indigenous cinema, this procedure is hardly predictable or given in that order. The anthropologist-filmmaker who approaches the community cinema has to continually unlearn his way of working if he tries to make his way through cinematographic realization, to knowledge, intimate and singular, in other ways of connecting. This implies a double task: that of moving away from learned ways of making movies, and learning new social and narrative codes.

The construction of a communitarian script

My experience of community cinema among the Shuar took place at the Kupiamais Center, in the Cordillera del Cóndor (Ecuadorian Amazon) within the framework of the Etsa-Nantu/Shuar-Camara [5]project. This project, coordinated by Verenice Benitez and Domingo Ankuash, arose at

5 For more information on this project you can visit the site www.camara-shuar.org

the request of some community leaders, who sought to learn how to use the cameras in order to denounce the abuses of extractive mining companies and the Ecuadorian Government, which violated the rights of Amazonian populations of the region. At the end of May 2014 we arrived there with Verenice to give a second film workshop, after an initial experience held in February of that year, in which I had not participated. After several days of uncertainty and internal discussions about cinema and our role in the community, we were able to begin. The first few days of the workshop, after explaining about the use of the camera and having presented a wide range of genres and cinematographic styles, we proposed the students to bring stories to make a first short film. The surprising thing was that, the next day, no one raised the realization of a documentary about the difficult situation they were living, but all the stories were stories about nonhuman beings; some, long and complex; others, as simple as the appearance of iwianch (nonhuman being that the shuar translate as devil to the Spanish language). On that day we pointed out in our notebooks about ten stories that would force us to improvise filming of fiction [6]films in the jungle, in the context of a major mining conflict that called and mobilized us.

The first work was a 7-minute short, entitled *Iwianch*[7], which narrates the unexpected visit of an *iwianch* to the house of a widow woman who lived alone with her children. In this first experience, the writing of the narrative script was simple, and the only ones involved in the audiovisual task were young and young adults, who narrated the traditional stories without confronting versions. Patrico Taish, a local leader, lent us his typical Shuar dwelling for filming, and from there he began to get involved in what we were doing. After getting a first cut we started to understand what kind of film we could achieve.

The participants of the workshop suggested that we continue with Tsunki's story, which tells the origins of his people. During the afternoon, and until late at night, we managed to write a first narrative script, and in a few days we started a new shoot. At the end of one of the last days of filming

6 Here it is important to note that the distinction between fiction and reality is an invention of the Western world, as proposed by Boudreault-Fournier et al. (2016): "This opposition does not exist in the Amerindian world, where dreams, or trances of shamans, are not characterized as a non-reality" (p.39). In this sense, when I speak of fiction, I refer to the type of cinematic approach that characterizes the writing, planning and filming of this audiovisual genre.

7 Film available at: https://vimeo.com/102850114

we visited Patricio, who would record the voiceover. We sat by the fire with Rosa, his wife, and I read aloud and without interruption the script before his attentive listening. When I finished the story, Patricio stared at me and said, "Who told you this story? This is not like this". He told us his version and told us about an old woman over 90 years old who would surely know another even better version. There we realized that the initial distance that adults had shown towards the learning of cinema had made us neglect their authority as narrators and bearers of history (of oral transmission), and that the versions of the stories would always be multiple, but the one that should be captured in a movie had to be the voice of someone with the wisdom and authority to narrate it. After three weeks of work, the film had to remain unfinished.

In October of that same year I returned to Kupiamais to continue with the workshops, this time with Franco Passarelli. He accompanied me the first few days, during which we resumed writing the script. This time Patricio Taish was already fully involved in the audiovisual task and proposed several changes in the way we work. I thought the actors with whom we had shot Tsunki's close-ups were very young and did not understand the importance of the story; they did not know the beings they had to incarnate. Then he proposed to invite other people and, trying to heal a community conflict that had opened up - there had been suspicions that the film project could favor one faction of the community and not another [8]- we incorporated people from other families. Finally, the 90-year-old grandmother gave us her version through her grandson; this was not the most complete version we had heard and differed quite a bit from the others, but no one suggested modifying it in any sense, so filming was done from it. Through this tour we were able to construct a definitive script for the short film Tsunki Aumatsamu (The Tsunki myth[9]).

8 The Shuar weave their links historically through alliances and enmities. To start working with the Shuar implies that these ruptures are manifested around the new initiatives. Patricio, without telling us, brought the film project to people who suspected that it was going to benefit some families to the detriment of others, and thus sought to pacify conflicts.

9 Film available at: https://vimeo.com/157352441

The individual and the collective. Narrative freedom

In January 2017 I had the opportunity to present advances in my doctoral research in the framework of the seminar Pour une anthropologie visuelle pluridisciplinaire et multimedia, organized by Jean-Paul Colleyn[10]. There I reflected on different experiences of the field around the indigenous community cinema, among them, the experience with the young people of the community qom Paraje Maipú, in the Argentine Chaco. At the end of the speech, a lady from the audience approached me and made two comments about the film I had projected: the first, about the happiness she saw in the protagonists - she considered it to be something lacking in French society; the second, more distant and sharp, was: "ça, pour nous, c'est bidonville" (for us this is a marginal neighborhood), from which I interpreted that she did not see the traits of indigeneity that she hoped to find in the cinema of these young people. With my limited French handling and the certainty that it was not for me to justify the aesthetic choices of the Maipu boys, I showed sincere amazement at her comment and thanked her for the intervention, unable to understand what she was expecting from that film for to be classified as "indigenous". That comment resonated and, on the one hand, it served to think the limitations of a film, like finished product, to show its conditions of realization; on the other hand, led me to reflect on the learning acquired during my field experience, which allowed me to understand some of the social bonds and agencies that were characteristic of the Qom communities of that region that had been put in play to make this film possible.

The young people of Maipú created their own way of narrating and that way has nothing to do with investigating the historical development of their community or their status as indigenous; that is not something that matters them or what they want to reflect on their videos. At first they proposed to remake a video clip of a k-pop band they listen to, but then they transformed that idea and hybridized it with a narrative of their own. The process of script was very different from the one of the shuar (it is possible to be said that, between the qom, the confrontation is not part of its way to be linked), and the adults did not participate. In the first meetings we noticed that the young people were intimidated every time we asked them to make proposals, so it

10 Jean-Paul Colleyn was my director during my mastership at the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, 2013), and has continued to lead my doctoral studies ever since. The intervention took place at EHESS, Paris, on January 19, 2016, and was titled: Cinéma amérindien: Une analyze de des expériences des peuples Shuar (Amazonie équatorienne) et Qom (Chaco argentin).

was necessary to find leaders inside the group who sketched the scripts in their homes; then, during the shooting, they would be transformed with the contributions of the whole team. In Maipu I worked together with Eugenia Mora, and we learned that our presence as adults and rokshe (white or "criollas") imposed a distance that was very difficult to avoid, and that so that young people could have the freedom to narrate what they wanted, that respectful distance was necessary; they would approach us to the extent that they needed advice. We also learned that in this way links are built in the Qom communities: adults and elders observe young people, but do not impose or regulate behaviors; they are there, in the background, to advice.

The short film performed by the young people of Paraje Maipú is called El sueño (The dream) and is a fiction that narrates the route of Ramiro, a boy who wakes up alone in a bed, turns on the television and sees himself dancing along with his brothers and his cousins. Mobilized by the nostalgia, under the stupor of the Chaquenian summer, decides to go looking for his friends and finds them doing activities of their daily life.

The writing of the script was collectively written, since Romina, who had prepared a first sketch of the history, proposed a flexible scheme so that each one, when deciding how it would appear in front of the camera, was modeling and modifying it. For example, Lia is one of the biggest girls in the group and is characterized by her shyness; she does not dance, but participates in looking for new videos and discovering choreographies. She is an expert in qom basketry, and Romina thought that Ramiro could find her making baskets. They filmed some beautiful blueprints on which she was sitting, with her hair down, working. In my opinion, this character offered the film an interesting counterpoint, since no other activities had been chosen that made reference to typically indigenous customs or trades. Unfortunately, Lia said that she did not like those images, and her colleagues - far from wanting to convince her to continue in that line - helped her to plan other scenes. All these modifications on the march were taken with naturalness by Romina, who pointed the changes in her notebook, without worrying about defending a position of author.

The story of the short film has an enigmatic ending: once all the young people gather around a campfire, Ramiro shows a companion a photo of the group and asks: "Will we dance again?". The next scene is a chopped plane that rotates on its axis and shows all the characters sleeping. As they wake

up, they run out through a door. A k-pop theme begins to sound and everyone goes towards sunset on a backlit plane; they run happily, celebrating together.

Returning to the assistant's question to the seminar, a possible answer to her question would be in how this film was made: its planning and final editing were carried out in an atmosphere of openness to proposals and mutual councils, characteristic of qom of that region, which resulted in a unique form of work. But the answer could be much broader and more complex if we make reference to the fact that the communities living in that area settled there at a time when the sugar mill Las Palmas del Chaco Austral [11]was operating. The indigenous populations of the region, who were being displaced by the advanced military of the Conquest of the Desert[12], became cheap labor in the exploitation of the sugar cane, and divided their time between the seasonal harvest and the hunting and the harvesting that they practiced in the mount, that still had not been cleared for the agricultural exploitation. When in the 1970s the wit began its long process of bankruptcy, families working in a room called Las Coloradas began to be violently persecuted. Their houses were destroyed and their gardens plowed; they were forbidden to hunt and fish on the mountain, which led to a great crisis and a terrible famine. In that frame arose the figure of a called leader Mateo Quintana. Quintana became evangelist and began to preach and have visions about a better future; began to have dreams about new lands where they would settle and get goods characteristic of white men. Those who followed the visions of this leader settled in Paraje Maipú, which for them is the Promised Land. The present time is the time of the concretion of the predictions of Quintana, those that continue materializing. Quintana envisioned that they would have school, light, water; people would come who would speak other languages, people would come who would teach them new technologies. As adults explained, they understand that our work is part of those predictions, and that the young are a generation capable of learning new knowledge and open to the world of whites. Adults have gone through

11 The mill was founded by the brothers Richard and Charles Hardy in 1882. These settlers, as a concession of the national government, obtained 100,000 hectares of territories inhabited by indigenous communities.

12 Unlike what happened in most Latin American countries, Argentina was built as a nation state from a discourse of effacement of the natives; there was an operation of striking, of denial. As Miguel Bartolomé (2003) states, "the myth of an immense 'deserted' territory and only traveled by a few hordes of 'barbarian' hunters has been particularly pleasing to Argentine historiography, in so far as it based the Europeanizing model under which it was organized the process of national construction. " (See also Briones, 2004; Lenton, 2005; Ramos, 2009).

the suffering of forced labor in the harvest, military persecution, constant uncertainty, and see in young people the concreteness of the promise of a new life, in a material and spiritual sense. That the young people of Maipu summon us to learn to film, and to film without any imposition as to what stories are to be narrated, or to the stories that anthropologists would narrate, is something that is closely related to how that community understands its historical future and living their community life.

The incomplete film

Some stories narrated through this cinema enter a dynamic that removes the status of finished work. When we finished filming Tsunki Aumatsamu, I spent several days in the community to try to edit a first cut on the ground and to discuss with people how we would give the film form. There were days of fever and health problems after the exhaustion of filming. Several people were going to visit me at the house of the Ankuash, where I was staying, and they offered me food and medicine; I showed them the progress of the editing. One rainy day, a neighbor's family sat down in the gallery talking to the women in the house. The Shuar language talks kept me a little on the sidelines until someone explained that they were talking about Tsunki's story. As the film still needed a lot of work to be shown, this gentleman asked me to tell him what we had filmed. I told the version as we had it, waiting for a response that would bring some new idea for the assembly. When I finished, the man fell silent and let out a long laugh. He told me: "Who told that story? I have a grandmother who explained it to me in another way." Between fatigue and fever I remember this episode more as a nightmare than a funny anecdote. In the afternoon Rosa and Patricio came to see me and offer me a healing chicha. I told them what had happened and Patricio said very calmly: "It would be good to know the story told by this other grandmother." At that moment I realized that the film would never be finished, in that it would continue to overlap with other oral stories and images about the story. There would always be new versions to narrate, new interpretations and new ways of conceiving the characters - nonhuman beings embodied by actors. The new possible versions of the story made us rethink the ellipses of the film and the spaces in which the narrated with the image would be replaced by the voice-over of Patricio that would cross

the whole film. Record these moving images, record those voices and those sounds and give them an order, a tone and a cadence led to new dynamics that contributed other senses to oral stories.

Perhaps, from this film, the Kupiamais shuar begin to conceive of Tsunki with another aspect, to grant the father Tsunki the noble look of Patricio Taish, with his smile always outlined. Perhaps these images can open the field to new stories, narrated by those who are and those who have already left. Image and sound are articulated. Sound, following Ong (2006), "gives access to the interiority of something without violating it," and has a "harmonizing" character as opposed to the "discriminating" character of the view. "The sight isolates; the ear unites. While the view places the observer out of what he is looking at, at a distance, the sound engulfs the listener "(Ong, 2006, p.75). These two elements are articulated to the interior of the film and are energized with the pure orality that shoots images in the interiority of the people. The audiovisual image has that ability to marvel, to affect us, to mobilize processes of identification with the image.

When Eugenia Mora began to give film lessons to some adults in Paraje Maipú, we showed a Paraguayan short film called *Karaí norte*, in order to explain the different types of planes and the *raccord* that is established in the assembly. At the end of the projection and turn on the light, one of the attending ladies looked at us with a frightened expression and said: "That man in the movie was *Nowet*, the owner of the mountain" (Cordeu, 1969-1970). The images of the cinema are associated with the imaginaries of the spectators. Community cinema forces the limits of the four corners of the rectangle of the screen. When in 2011 La nación oculta (The hidden nation) was released, recognized as the first fiction film produced by indigenous peoples of Chaco, a celebration was held in which indigenous peoples from different regions participated; there were ritual ceremonies and that honored the actors and the filmmakers. The materiality of film, its successes or problems, were left in the margin during the emotional act - in which there were tears and songs. The film was completed in that performance ceremony of which now, for those who live it, is inseparable.

Final Thoughts

Shared anthropology proposed Rouch. Today, many of us make shared cinema and, from there, we rethink anthropology and cinema, in that task in which the author's roles and the order of procedures are blurred to be

reinvented in the framework of new cinematographic practices. With this tour about some experiences around the indigenous cinematographic realization, my intention was to open a space for reflection to approach the cinema in the social framework in which it is created; the appropriation of the media by the indigenous peoples of Latin America expands the reflection around the audiovisual. Faye Ginsburg proposes that indigenous media, together with ethnographic cinema, "try to communicate something about this social or collective identity that we call 'culture', in order to mediate (that is expected) through the gaps of space, time, knowledge and prejudice "(1991, p 104, own translation). The quality of ethnography as a sensitive experience of accompaniment allows us to go through other ways of inhabiting this world, and offers us, from there, other dimensions of the cinematographic.

Also, with this tour I sought to make visible some issues of this globalized world that challenge the indigenous peoples. Among the Shuar, the choice not to make a film of the immediate - of denunciation - but of the remote, leads us to reflect on the urgency of translating these traditional stories, not in the style of a rescue cinema, but as a response to the advance the interests of the modern project, which seeks to erase the singularities of populations and banish all those who do not feed a predatory economic system. Perhaps the Shuar fictions operate as a new way to convey these stories and continue to reinvent them. On the other hand, accompanying processes of learning cinema in indigenous communities meant for me to leave aside the colonialist prejudices of what the "others" should film and how they should do it. The narrative freedom of the young people of Paraje Maipu allowed them to record everything that an ethnographer would never film in the field; they cut their surroundings, their bond with adults, their way of inhabiting space, and they hybridize their habits and landscapes with the aesthetics of the globalized k-pop. This freedom is built from an indigenous *ethos* [13]of non-imposition.

13 This film is the product of a series of workshops that since 2008, the Center for Training and Filmmaking of Bolivia (CEFREC), as part of the indigenous film festivals organized by the Film Directorate of the province of Chaco (see Soler, 2017).

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