

FESTIVAL

16th RAI Film Festival 2019 | Bristol (UK), 27-30 March 2019.

“Why does ethnographic film matter now?” and “Where is theory in filmmaking?” These questions and many others were addressed by the 16th Edition of the Film Festival of the Royal Anthropological Institute, hosted in a wonderful and sunny Bristol between the 27th and 30th of March 2019. The aims of the festival were to delve into the relationships between anthropology, documentary filmmaking, and visual culture, and to question the meaning of ethnographic film today. Over 60 films from more than 30 countries were screened on the four days of the festival. A good number of special events, conference panels, workshops, and a masterclass contributed to enrich the festival. The exciting program was complemented by the conversation between Angela Puccini and Kim Longinotto, who celebrated her 42-year career as a multi-award-winning filmmaker.

Especially appropriate to fulfill the expectations triggered by the richness of the program was the Watershed, a cultural dynamic space located on Bristol’s historic harbourside in the city center.

It could be said that “water” — represented in different ways — was one of the main themes in some of the movies screened. Water like “all the sea ahead of” to reach Italy in *It Was Tomorrow* (Italy, UK 2018). Here, the visual anthropologist Alexandra D’Onofrio combines animation, storytelling and collaborative filmmaking methods to narrate the story of Ali, Mahmoud, and Mohamed, three Egyptian men awarded with legal residence ten years after their arrival in Italy. Animation and storytelling are also present in the *Book of the Sea* (Russia 2018) where Aleksei Vakhrushev intertwines myth and reality to examine the struggle for survival of a community living on the frozen fringe of the Bering Strait in Russia. The movie was awarded the *Archaeology and Material Culture Film Prize*. Water is also a character in *The Absence of Apricots* (Pakistan, Germany 2018) and *Paani: Of Women and Water* (India 2018), two films presented in the student program. In the



former, awarded with the *Wiley Blackwell Student Film Prize*, the filmmaker Daniel Asadi Faezi masterfully combines myth, memory, and the perception of loss to access the everyday lives of people in a village in northern Pakistan that were dislocated after having lost their home to landslide that created a lake where once was the village. In the latter, the anthropologist Costanza Burstin focuses her attention on female social practices connected to the management of water in a Muslim village of Rajasthan, India. The film gives a vivid account of the struggles and forms of co-operation between women dealing with the scarcity of water.

Intrigued by the proposal made by the filmmaker Julia Dahr and by Julie Lunde Lillesaeter (Director of Photography) to participate in a movie about the consequences of climate change in Kenya, Kisilu Musya named only one condition: that he, too, would get a camera to tell his story with his own gaze. That's how *Thank You for the Rain* (Norway, UK 2017) was born. Through his camera, the farmer Kisilu welcomes us into the intimacy of his everyday life, offering a glimpse of his and his family struggles in dealing with drought, floods, and storms. After an unexpected big storm destroys his house, we see Kisilu transform from a farmer and a family man, firstly into a leader for his community, and finally into an activist against climate change on the global stage.

As the story unfolds, a profound sense of cultural distance seems to emerge from the film, intensified by the use of two rather different quality formats in the picture: glossy photography was used by Julia and a lower quality camera was used by Kisilu and his family. Furthermore, the embarrassment of Kisilu's wife, Christina's experiences in dealing with contrasting feelings in seeing her husband rapidly taking on a public role in the community and worldwide, seems not fully understood by the filmmaker. Winner of the *Basil Wright Film Prize*, this compelling movie offers interesting food for thought to critically reflect on the implications of doing a documentary or ethnographic film.

Undoubtedly, the different conference panels have made great contributions in this respect. Particularly stimulating was the debate that explored the new possibilities that a multimodal approach can offer to ethnographic film practices. Recently, the theme of multimodality has led to reconsider anthropological practices contributing to a very dynamic debate in the discipline. In this regard, the contribution of the visual anthropologist Mihai Andrei Leaha (University of São Paulo) was of extreme interest for reflecting on the role and impact of anthropological knowledge and technical skills in the context of collaborative practices. Interesting also the discussion on the use of 360° cameras and VR devices in research practices.

As Mark Westmoreland (University of Leiden) has pointed out, 360° vision allows stepping out of the binocular view of the predator and taking on a prey's perspective, posing the intriguing question of re-thinking the cinematic grammar. Similarly, Paolo Favero (University of Antwerp) highlighted how, introducing the possibility of bodily interacting with the film, the 360° view hides a conceptual break down with the Renaissance perspective that dominates western ontology.

Certainly, these positions urge a dense reflection on the blurring relation between theory and practice in ethnographic filmmaking. According to Laurent Van Lancker, each film project is different and thus it requires its own methodology and theoretical background. In his inspiring Masterclass, Van Lancker pointed out that the choice of filming is never self-evident, rather it must result from an intense process of critical analysis of the project itself. Questioning the use of the camera in filming can lead to developing different narrative forms that could create unusual storylines. In *Kalès* (Belgium 2017) a dense process of reflection and intimate relation with the people involved emerges from the solid narrative. Through collaborative practice, Van Lancker provides immersive access to the human dimension of social life and survival strategies of migrants.

Overall, the Rai Film Festival has proved to be a valuable place of dialogue and in-depth discussion on the edges of visual ethnography today. In the past years, there has been a tendency to erase the peculiarities of ethnographic cinema compared to documentary cinema. Yet, the contributions at the film festival illustrate the important differences between the two genres. Ethnographic film-making results from a long process of in-depth thinking on the anthropological research project. As a result, the intimate relationship between the anthropologist-filmmaker and the research informants who are the subject of the film are evident in the ethnographic reflexivity of the finished work. Documentary films which are attributed ethnographic value often suffer from weak ethnographic reflection and fragile thinking on the use of the camera in the field.

The Rai Film Festival presents us with the opportunity to engage the question of how to understand ethnography in film. In particular, it prods us to interrogate the filmmaker's intentionality. Is it the ethnographic intentionality that leads the gaze of the filmmaker, or is it rather a documentary look on an ethnographic subject?

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