

## **VIDEOMAKING.**

### **ACTION-RESEARCH EXPERIMENTATIONS IN HIGHLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**

*by Giovanni Attili*

Within the CARITALENTS didactic framework, I've been teaching the module "Videomaking: action-research experimentations in highly diverse communities". The main goal of these lessons was to provide students the main tools to reflect on and develop autonomous research projects based on the potentialities of audiovisual languages. In particular, these lessons have been an incredibly interesting occasion to involve students in a complex debate on a specific research case study I've been working on, together with Prof Leonie Sandercock (University of British Columbia, Vancouver), in the last years. What follows is an account of that research project, and its wider multilayered implications.

The project "Finding Our Way" is based in Northern British Columbia (Canada) where two First Nations, the Ts'il Kaz Koh Nation and the Cheslatta Carrier Nation face ongoing tensions with the non-Native world. People dispossessed, deep historic wounds, and still unresolved conflicts are the ingredients of a story where two separate worlds, two solitudes, exist side by side, Natives and settlers, each with vastly different life experiences. This research is an investigation of the inconvenient truth of Canada's apartheid. It is an exploration of the very process of colonization and its devastating and lasting consequences on First Nations communities. It is the attempt to understand the historic and ongoing situation of Indigenous peoples: dispossessed of their traditional lands by European 'settlers' (or colonizers); forced onto marginal patches of land under the 19<sup>th</sup> century land policy known as the Reserve System of Indian Lands; disempowered as a result of generations of physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of the Residential School system. These First Nations communities seem today to be facing a Sisyphean task of healing as well as of economic and social development. Here is a classic case of uneven development as a result of discriminatory practices that only in the past several decades were being challenged in the courts and addressed through legislation. But many First Nations had been so disempowered by almost two centuries of colonization that it is still difficult for some of them to actually assert their new rights, and equally difficult for the dominant culture to accept this assertion, let alone its material consequences.

In this framework, "Finding Our Way" is an action-research experiment based on a communicative and collaborative planning approach whose goal is to encourage a dialogue among conflicting subjectivities. In order to achieve these goals we've been developing a 3 years ethnographic research aimed at building a polyphonic narrative through the intersection of multiple voices, Native and non-Native. Our intent was to depict a conflicted *voicescapes* characterized by tensions and multi-focal visions which are often antagonistic and irreducible. These voices were captured through a series of in-depth-interviews that required a long and intense interactive process. In this process we had to overcome our ignorance and intimidation, deal with our outsidersness, learn the arts of the contact zone and live through a space where different worlds meet, clash, grapple with each other. We had to progressively cross a vast cultural distance and jointly find a way together as co-researchers and partners, experimenting a challenging collaborative research approach. From this perspective we tried to till the field for an open dialogue to sow: many contacts were nourished all through the process where we progressively started knowing each other, building a mutual trust relationship, sharing and collaboratively discussing the research objectives and creating the space for deeper interaction to occur. We experienced this process as a humble and humbling activity: a learning journey.

As previously outlined, the analysis was based on an ethnographic approach: a tool that is potentially able to penetrate the darkness of the unknown, to extricate tangles of forests, to make differences available for discussion. Nevertheless, ethnographies do not pretend to give an objective and neutral account of the reality researchers want to investigate. Every description is necessarily partial, opinionated and value-driven, and therefore political. We constantly apply filters to make sense of the world. In that forest we use a cone of light to illuminate what is relevant to us, through judgments and moral assumptions. From this perspective the ethnographic account we ended up building couldn't be conceived as the transparent revealing of an ontological reality that existed independently from us. We needed to abandon the obsession with a mimetic representation in order to experience a significant metaphorical shift: from discovery and findings to constructing and making. Constructing a story. Making sense of the world we experienced.

But how could we represent and socialize this analysis? What kind of "text" did we want to build and for which purposes? The objective of the research was to open up a new space for dialogue about the past, present, and future: a dialogue that can potentially lead to action, to different ways of doing things, to alternative imaginings that can re-shape the fragile co-existence of two peoples, Native and non-Native Canadians, towards reconciliation and partnership. What kind of language was the most appropriate to socialize a delicate story and to engage people in a profound dialogue about their conflicted communities?

We decided to take advantage of the potentialities of filmic languages. As we already experimented in a previous project (Attili, Sandercock 2007; Sandercock, Attili, 2009) digital languages strengthen the expressive possibilities of ethnographies, connecting a qualitative study to the potentialities of richer communicative languages. Digital ethnographies expressively narrate stories, whose role is now widely recognized in the planning field (Attili 2008). In simple terms, they are able to communicate narratives through aesthetic involvements, which are crucial in social interactions. From this point of view, digital ethnographies can be interpreted as *relational and communicative tools* that "help building social bonds through learning and knowledge exchange; communicative tools that are able to listen to, to combine and to give expression to diversity" (Levy 1997: 133). These tools invite people to suggest modifications, further narrations through a dynamic knowledge management to be explored "not only conversationally but even through sensitive modalities according to significant paths and associations" (Levy 1997: 210). Understanding that Reason doesn't produce the totality of our actions, to create real communicative space, and induce people to act it is not enough to "tell," rather it is necessary to transfer energies, make sentiments and emotions vibrate, awaken latent aspirations, knowledge, and energies, rediscovering the powerful role of artistic and poetic languages. It is necessary to focus on the cognitive and communicative performance of aesthetic pleasure, a pleasure that is not an accessory but rather a central moment of every communicative process (Gargani 1999, Decandia 2000).

This aesthetic pleasure is connected with the capacity new media have to contextually use different expressive languages. They are complex scores of multi-sensory idioms that can be creatively reassembled to express and communicate specific contents. Potentially, new media have as many epistemologies and languages as you can find in the world itself (Levy 1997). They represent an extremely versatile and dynamic container, inside which it is possible to build complex "images": signs and communicative metaphors which are co-involved and interpenetrated. The creative bricolage of media and diversified messages produce something more than the simple summation of these elements: it is a digital poetics that is germinative of new meanings.

In our case the collaborative process of filmmaking (interview process and several meetings where we got feedback from the community concerning the research objectives and the construction of the

story) was the occasion for a dialogue (between conflicting subjectivities) to start. But this dialogue was inflamed by the social interaction that occurred (in a carefully planned space/process) around several screenings where the community was engaged in envisioning together ways of moving forward. For three months we planned this space/process, which involved setting up a local advisory committee, training local folks as facilitators of “dialogue circles”, doing a special screening for school teachers, and some of the really powerful learning came out of that preparation process. The planning intervention that we designed was aimed at encouraging the healing of the historic trauma and deep conflicts through the dialogues that the film enabled. At the same time it nurtured a visioning process engaging with how things might be different. The final step has evolved into action projects of a more typical planning nature, from land use to economic development to facilities planning. A way to move towards a relationship of mutual respect and joint problem-solving.

The narration of this case study together with the projection of the documentary recalled a great involvement in the CARITALENTS students. Although the case study is undoubtedly rooted in a specific socio-cultural context, it helped students to focus on different and more general themes: racial discrimination, conflicts, land issues, differences and objectifying categorizations. Moreover it was the occasion to reflect on the construction of a collaborative research project: in this approach researchers and communities are connected by a mutual, collaborative and pedagogical relationship. In this respect, “participants have a co-equal say in how research should be conducted, what should be studied, which methods should be used, which findings are valid and acceptable, how the findings have to be implemented and how the consequences of such actions are to be assessed” (Denzin 2003: 257). They have a co-equal say even in dealing with ethically sensitive issues. It is what we call “situational ethics” (Sandercock, Attili 2010): an approach which transgresses a universal pre-established or pre-approved set of procedures. In this respect, the research cannot be guided by a monocultural ethical rationalism. Rather, it needs to be built in collaborative ways through a mutual learning process: the different subjects who are part of this process have a co-responsibility in defining the proper strategies to deal with ethically sensitive issues. This approach is particularly relevant in multicultural contexts characterized by a plurality of ethical perspectives, values and views.

Finally, the lessons have been the occasion to reflect on how a filmic and collaborative research project could have been developed in the Caribbean context and to what extent it could potentially open up a new space for dialogue about the past, present, and future of this territory.

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