

## Visual Ethnography

# New Horizons for Social Research Using Digital Media in Southeast Asia

Report >  
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A workshop on "Visual Ethnography: New Horizons in Social Research Using Digital Media in Southeast Asia" was hosted by the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore in February last year. It brought together documentary film-makers from within and beyond the Southeast Asian region, local media practitioners from Singapore, and around fifty participants, for discussion and screenings of recent works by the speakers. The intention was to generate an exchange of ideas on the potentials of new digital media technologies and how these will transform ethnographic film-making.

By Aileen Toohey & Roxana Waterson

The workshop was structured around four sessions: "Interplays, initiatives and directions in ethnographic film"; "The challenges of teaching visual media"; "Documenting social issues"; and "New directions for digital media in Southeast Asia". First to speak was Paul Henley, Director of the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, Manchester University. In his historical overview of ethnographic film, Henley discussed how the presentation of central characters had moved from romantic archetypes to increasingly more individualized characterizations. He showed the range of fabrications involved in the making of these films, which led to a discussion of what constitutes documentary truth, an issue with obvious parallels to the writing of ethnographic texts. Arguably, the reflexive turn in anthropology since the 1980s has enabled a fuller appreciation of film within the discipline.

Picking up on the interrelationships between technology and ethnographic film, Ms Judith MacDougall from the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, ANU, Canberra, argued that digital technologies will bring new ways of thinking about film, a more sophisticated understanding of the techniques involved and a deeper appreciation of the filmic image. MacDougall argued that film has remained an underused medium in the social sciences. For this to change, film-making would have to be acknowledged as an act of research equivalent in value to other forms of fieldwork. The power of film to depict experiential knowledge and to represent social phenomena as complex wholes embedded in other events should be recognized. Referring to her latest film, *Diya* (2001), she commented on the advantages that digital technologies offered in terms of subtitling while still in the field, and the possibilities of editing versions for different audiences.

Mr Kidlat Tahimik, Artistic Director of Sunflower Cooperative, makes films which are at once highly personal and deeply political, concerning issues arising from the long history of colonization in the Philippines. Notable among these are *Perfumed Nightmare* (1978) and *Turumba* (1984). Kidlat's current interests include a collaborative project with Ifugao villagers that encourages interested individuals to use digital cameras as a means of preserving and documenting their own culture. Such footage will become part of their living legacy and can be integrated into the local school curriculum.

The third session, "Documenting social issues", aimed to position ethnographic film as a genre within the wider realm of documentary film. Mr Alan Rosenthal, visiting film-maker with Ngee Ann Polytechnic's Film and Media Studies Programme, and Professor of Communications at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1971-2000), has directed over fifty TV documentaries and docu-dramas. Since docu-drama is, in effect, an extension of investigative journalism, its credibility depends on a commitment to accurate research. As an illustration, Rosenthal screened *The Holocaust on Trial* (2000), which recreates the libel case brought by historian David Irving against Deborah Lipstadt, author of *Denying the Holocaust* (New York: Free Press, 1993). Using courtroom transcripts as the trial proceeded and released within a fortnight of its conclusion, this film was able to make its impact while the issue was still topical.

Mr Sitthipong Kalayane is Managing Director and co-founder of Images Asia, an alternative media organization in Chiang Mai, Thailand, that provides video training to ethnic minorities and socially concerned NGOs. Sitthipong has produced a number of significant documentaries on social issues in Burma and Thailand. He showed two recent examples: *Smiles* (a critical appraisal of hypocrisy in Thai politics, made to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights), and *Road to Nowhere* (2000), concerning forced labour in Burma. Local practitioners Jason Lai and Tony Chow, who run their own small production companies, showed excerpts of their documentaries made for local television, and discussed their

work and the frustrations of editorial interference from TV producers.

Professor James Fox added a historical dimension with an account of his own long involvement with ethnographic film-making and teaching, and his collaboration with Timothy Asch on several documentaries in eastern Indonesia. He recalled the almost insuperable problems of carrying 300 kilos or so of equipment through Indonesian customs, and conveying it to remote island locations. Today, he noted, the digital video camera is increasingly becoming "part of the kit bag" for the anthropologist, as much as a notebook and still camera.

Participants in the concluding session, "New directions for digital media in Southeast Asia", included Michele Gnutzman from Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Leong Wai-Teng and Mr Joe Peters from NUS, and Ms Gauri Krishnan from Singapore's Asian Civilizations Museum. Topics included innovation in museum displays, research in musicology, and the presentation by Ms MacDougall of a remarkable multimedia programme, the Joborr Project, devised by the Anbarra Aboriginal community of north-central Arnhemland, in collaboration with anthropologists and film-makers.

An important question raised in the ensuing discussion concerned the nature of the relationship entered into with those who agree to be filmed. The attitude of ethnographic film-makers to their subjects is generally highly sympathetic, even protective, and the film may become, in some way, a record of their dialogical relationship. But subjects, however sophisticated or enthusiastic, are hardly ever aware of the full implications of being filmed. MacDougall stressed that consent was a matter of continuing negotiation. Broader political contexts, changes of government, or questions of censorship also complicate the issue.

This issue of censorship was a second important theme. It had, indeed, been an aim of the workshop to facilitate a discussion of the constraints within which regional film-makers must operate, and to debate how far they may be able to open up new spaces for the depiction and discussion of social and cultural issues. Within Southeast Asia, government investment in IT, degrees of media censorship and surveillance, the affordability of digital equipment, and levels of personal access to the Internet all vary widely, while political sensitivities oblige film-makers to deal subtly with certain topics, or avoid them altogether. Such conditions are not unique to this region, however. Henley described how his most recent film, *The Enemy Within* (2000), which depicts the workings of the European Parliament, had been withheld by the BBC, which judged it too controversial. Besides an awareness of these limitations, participants also gained much

insight into the creative potentials which digital technologies are bringing to visual research.

This workshop is one of several initiatives in NUS's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Other related developments include a Programme in Information and Communications Media, and the opening in January 2002 of an undergraduate module on Visual Ethnography in the Department of Sociology, which has attracted intense interest from students. In November 2001, Karl Heider lectured here on his use of film in teaching anthropology, and in April 2002, students will be privileged to enjoy a visit from another well-known ethnographic filmmaker, Peter Crawford. He will be talking and showing his work, as well as evaluating student exercises. We hope to organize more workshops in the future, and expand the training we can offer in video research. <

#### references

##### Filmography:

- Henley, Paul, *The Enemy Within* (2000); 26 mins.
- Kalayane, Sitthipong, *Smiles Chiang Mai: Images Asia*, (1999); 30 mins. Winner of the Silver Certificate in the Prix Leonardo Competition, Parma Film Festival, 1999.
- *Road to Nowhere Chiang Mai: Images Asia* (2000); 30 mins
- MacDougall, Judith, *Diya: The Life History of a Thing* (2001); 56 minutes.
- Tahimik, Kidlat, *Perfumed Nightmare* El Cerrito, California: Flower Films, (1978) 91 mins. Winner of the International Critics Award of the Berlin Film Festival.
- Tahimik, Kidlat, *Turumba* El Cerrito, California: Flower Films (1984); 94 mins. Winner of the Top Cash Award at the Mannheim Film Festival, Germany.
- Woodhead, Leslie, *The Holocaust on Trial*, BBC (2000); 90 mins.

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Group of speakers and some of the participants at the workshop. Back Row, L-R: Paul Henley, James Fox, Michelle Gnutzman (4th from left), Judith MacDougall (5th from left). Front Row, L-R: Roxana Waterson, Sitthipong Kalayane, Leong Wai Teng, Tony Chow, Kidlat Tahimik (6th from left), Aileen Toohey.