

EASA Media Anthropology Network - discussions -

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/>

Informal discussion on REVERSE ANTHROPOLOGY

Medianthro mailing list
9 – 18 October 2006

Subject: [Mediantro] Reverse Anthropology revisited
From: John Postill <jpostill@usa.net>
Date: Mon, 09 Oct 2006 12:41:24 +0100

Dear All

You may recall that a couple of weeks ago we had a brief exchange on this list on a 'Reverse Anthropology' Project for a documentary series (see original email from Wendy Willems below and I'll be forwarding Adam Fish's response in a separate email). The project leader, Tom Beard from KEO films, would like to respond on the list to the issues raised by Adam, so he'll be joining us as a guest subscriber shortly. You're all welcome to join in the dialogue as I hope you'll agree that this is an important debate that adds to previous discussions we've had on the public profile of anthropology, eg in relation to the TV series Tribes, etc.

Best wishes

John

Given earlier discussions on this list on anthropologists in the media and the public profile of anthropology, I thought I would post message below, which seems a reverse project of the horrendous BBC series 'Tribe', earlier discussed on this list. And it presupposes a particular kind of 'anthropology' of course...

Best wishes,

Wendy Willems

Centre for Media and Film Studies
School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London

-----Oorspronkelijk bericht-----

Van: Angelica Baschiera [mailto:ab17@soas.ac.uk] Namens cas@soas.ac.uk
Verzonden: 25 September 2006 16:23
Aan: Angelica Baschiera
Onderwerp: FW: 'Reverse Anthropology' Project for documentary series

from: Tom [mailto:tom@keofilms.com]

The London based documentary filmmakers KEO Films are making a series of 'Reverse Anthropology' documentaries for Channel 4. We plan to initiate a rich cultural exchange of viewpoints in the series, which not only explores the culture of remote societies, but also invites fresh insights on Western Society. We have been making anthropological documentaries around the world for the last 10 years (including the hugely successful 'Going to Extremes' series' with Oxford University geography don Nick Middleton). We would now like to invite some remote indigenous communities who have a good reason to come to the UK anyway (perhaps land rights or political issues to raise awareness of, or to raise money through music or art) to come over here and explore and comment on Western culture.

We feel this very modern approach - a two-way anthropology and cultural understanding - will truly give a voice to remote indigenous communities on TV for the first time, as they explore the West. Someone with close links to a remote and culturally rich society (such as an anthropologist or person from the community now living in the UK) would travel back there with a film crew. The first part of the film would explore the culture of this society, giving the viewer an understanding of the groups own cultural context. The second part would involve a group from the community coming back to the UK and explore their thoughts and insights into Western culture.

We're keen to include two African communities in the project. A group of Baka or Bayaka Pygmies - from the DRC, CAR or Congo Brazzaville - their rich cultural traditions where the spirit world is so entwined with the pragmatic matters of the everyday would provide a fascinating standpoint from which to view the Western addiction to materialism, while their close relationship with the forest is so different to our distance from food production. We're also keen to include a remote community from Ethiopia (perhaps the Omo Valley) or the Sudan.

KEO Films are aware that this is a challenging project, and that handled incorrectly could have negative consequences for those involved. However, we have wide experience of making anthropological documentaries with some of the remotest groups on earth - including with the Kombai in Papua New Guinea, the Matsis in the Amazon and Baka Pygmies in the forests of the Central African Republic, and feel that working with anthropologists and others within the communities, such a project could be set up and handled in the right way, providing positive opportunities for the visiting groups involved, generating unique and fascinating insights into western culture, and opening a healthy debate on new egalitarian anthropological approaches.

I would very much like to discuss this idea with anthropologists specialising in the African groups we're interested in (or if you feel they're are others that would work particularly well), as well as talk to anyone else who knows the remote communities well in these areas for any reason. Please pass on this email to anyone who you feel might be interested, or don't hesitate to get in touch yourself.

With all kind regards,

Tom

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Subject: [Medianthro] Fwd: Reverse Anthropology and Tribe
From: John Postill <jpostill@usa.net>
Date: Mon, 09 Oct 2006 12:44:36 +0100

** fwd. from VISCAM list with author's permission **

----- Original Message -----

Yes, Cynthia they are ignorant to experiments in media-based reverse anthropology both inside and outside anthropology. But more irritating than their essentialism and romanticism of the primitive other is their plan to use the noble images in their own political engineering: "...where the spirit world is so entwined with the pragmatic matters of the everyday would provide a fascinating standpoint from which to view the Western addiction to materialism." Indeed, the producers admit to desiring to use representations of city-awestruck indigenous Africans as leverage for their own anti-capitalistic sentiments. Wendy may call "Tribe" "horrendous" but in it the lives of indigenous people are recorded as lived in interaction with a small camera crew and the humble ambitions of a would-be anthropologist. Yes, in "Tribe" indigenous people are used to entertain and Parry gives but a small snapshot of anthropological insight and a view into the initiation of fieldwork --but in this proposed series, the Kombai and others are kaleidoscopic tools for Westerners' introspection. They will be plopped in a city as canaries in a coal mine in order to prove the producer's assumed degree of Western societal degradation.

"Tribe" featured indigenous people doing regular activities in their homelands; this proposed program is a contrived experiment for political purposes. An innovative and ambitious project yes but without a clearer sense of the theoretical implications of media-based cross-cultural contact and reverse anthropology this proposed project will have many more "horrendous" implications to the televisual representation indigenous people than "Tribe." And if you want to continue to debate the merits "Tribe" take it up with me in this month's Anthropology Today.

Adam Fish
UCLA: Film/TV/Digital Media

On 9/26/06, Cynthia Close <cclose@der.org> wrote:
> These folks at KEO films seem to have a very short historical knowledge of
> anthropology and film. I wonder if they are aware of the work of Jean
> Rouch???

>
>
> Cynthia Close
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Subject: Re: [Medianthro] Fwd: Reverse Anthropology and Tribe
From: Daniel Taghioff <danieltaghioff@yahoo.com>
Date: Mon, 9 Oct 2006 11:40:01 -0700 (PDT)

I think it is kind of funny, after the last discussion on the list, that 'we' (as anthropologists) seem to get so angry every time anyone shows an interest in our little patch.

We seemed to respond in a similar way to the campaign group we encountered before. And just before that we were complaining about how we are not a part of more mainstream discussions.

Are we the "perpetual outsiders," (permanently suspended in quotation marks) standing at the edge of the party, bemoaning the banality of others, and upset because no-one wants to get to know us better?

Now I am guilty of getting lost in obscure debates, but I really feel the need to engage with others on their own terms. Why do we put so much emphasis on doing this 'in the field' and yet behave so intolerantly 'at home'?

Daniel

.....
Daniel Taghioff
Researcher

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Subject: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series
From: Tom <tom@keofilms.com>
Date: Wed, 11 Oct 2006 17:41:44 +0100

Dear Medianthro Forum,

I'd like to thank Dr John Postill for his invitation to join this forum. An email of mine about a documentary series being made by KEO Films made its way on to the forum a couple of weeks ago, and it seems, caused quite a stir. I'd be very interested to engage in some of the debates raised by subscribers, and take this opportunity of seeking anthropologists views on the kind of anthropology proposed by the series.

The idea of the 'reverse anthropology' project has certainly raised varied responses from anthropologists. Many have been very enthusiastic about the idea, saying that it could be an invigorating new area for 'popular' (by which I mean to differentiate from but not exclude 'academic') anthropology. Others have pointed out, perhaps understandably, that the project will have many "horrendous" implications." There is no doubt that, handled in the wrong way and serving the wrong priorities, such a project could have very negative impacts for those coming to the UK. As experienced anthropological film-makers we are of course adamant that this will not be the case.

To clear up a few details about the project, and I hope to reassure some:

- central to the project is the wish to allow groups involved to have their own voice within the films. This will be done through the use of both sub-titles and a translator. Very few modern mainstream anthropological films achieve this - for example, 'Tribe' relies almost exclusively on Bruce Parry's interpretation of the society he's in (and to be fair, doesn't pretend to do anything else).

- we perceive the project as a straightforward cultural exchange. We do not, as far as I'm aware, have any political purposes/agendas.

- we absolutely do not plan to reinforce the idea of the "noble savage." Indeed, we hope that this project will help dispel such a myth - so often reinforced my popular ideas of anthropology - by showing that people from 'remote' areas have a very clear world view, very probably including their own clear idea of the way the West operates (just as we have our idea of how their world operates). Talking to people - mainly anthropologists - who have invited someone from a 'remote' group to the West in the past, the visitor was often far from "awestruck," and this simplistic reaction is not one that we plan to rely on in the series. We're certainly not seeking to reinforce the idea of the traditional v's modern. Rather, the message is more likely to be that we all live in the 21st century with equally valid worldviews.

- I must admit it was foolish of me to include the illustration in my original email (although I naively thought it was just going to a few anthropologists at SOAS in London) regarding the Baka pygmies in the Congo where "the spirit world is so entwined with the pragmatic matters of the everyday would provide a fascinating standpoint from which to view the Western addiction to materialism." This was an observation made by an anthropologist who's worked in the Congo for many years - but I agree foolish to include. We do not plan to be prescriptive in the responses of those who visit, or engineer a political message. A uniqueness - and for documentary makers, a riskiness - of this project is that the insights of the visitors into UK culture are entirely unpredictable.

- Also key to the series will be the inclusion of a person who knows the UK well and also has strong personal links with the visitors. This must be someone that the visitors trust and can confide in, providing support so that they do not feel like they're "plopped in a city." Each film will begin with this person visiting the homes of those due to come to the UK. This is also essential to allow the viewer to understand the cultural

context that the visitors to the UK are coming from.

- We certainly plan to invite those from a community who have a strong personal reason for wanting to visit. This could take on many forms, difficult to forecast without meeting the communities involved (and without seeming prescriptive in our intentions).

I would be the first to admit that this kind of project has a huge number of potential pitfalls and problems - but I also believe, that if it is handled correctly, it could be very positive for all involved.

In terms of anthropology, as popularly perceived in the West, I think it could have positive outcomes, and would welcome your thoughts. The series will of course be made for a large, general audience, not an elite group of anthropologists. I think it is fair to say that anthropology is still regarded by many in the West as western construct where white men and women visit and try to understand remote non-western societies. Of course, this is an outdated and unfair analysis - but it remains the norm. Series such as 'Tribe' have in some ways reinforced, but in other ways adjusted (putting a more empathetic, interactive face on anthropology) this perception.

This project turns this perception on its head. I know it is not necessarily a new idea to anthropologists, but to the wider public, I believe it is. Yes, I am aware of the films of Jean Rouch, but I very much doubt a large percentage of the series' audience will be, and that is what counts.

I'd be very interested to learn whether readers of this forum feel that perhaps this project could be a chance to overturn some of the deeply engrained western perceptions of people living in 'remote' societies, and at the same time overturn some of our pre-conceptions about our own society? Might not the revelation that someone from the Congo has a world view that not explains his own immediate milieu (as well as a far wider reaching cosmology) but also offers a valid and refreshing insight into our own culture be a good thing in terms of sweeping away the preconceptions of the past?? Surely an age-old driving force behind anthropological study has been the search for deeper and general truths about our own societal and cultural relationships by identifying reflections of these in other societies? And therefore is it not just as valid - and interesting to us (and to them) - to allow others to explore and comment our own society against their own frame of reference?

Undoubtedly the above is reducing complex philosophies of anthropology to certain truisms (and makes certain linguistic blunders!). But it strikes me that this project could provide a liberating reinterpretation of both our own and others societies, refresh outdated populist views of anthropology and be a positive experience for those involved.

Please let me know your thoughts. Apologies for this rather lengthy posting. And thanks for having me on your Forum.

All kind regards,

Tom

Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series
From: John Postill <jpostill@usa.net>
Date: Wed, 11 Oct 2006 18:54:17 +0100

Many thanks for that further information about your documentary series, Tom. Would anyone like to ask Tom any further questions or to comment on his project?

Subject: Re: [Mediantthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: Mark Pedelty <pedeltmh@umn.edu>

Date: Wed, 11 Oct 2006 13:03:56 -0500

Dear Tom,

I applaud your effort to make Anthropology relevant to wider audiences. The less relevant the forum and format, the more one is able to produce a message that stays true to one's beliefs, especially if those truths challenge powerful institutions, ideologies, etc. There is great purity in irrelevance.

The more we move into "popular" arenas (i.e., where most people are), the more we must be willing to see our messages mediated by those institutions and ideologies that we have set-out to challenge. That is an essential, yet extremely difficult, politics.

Based on what you have written about your project, it seems that it has great potential to enlighten audiences. Any act of communication has to deal with dominant interpretive frameworks, and certainly people will apply those frames to this series. That is inevitable. The important thing is that you are also making it possible to widen and perhaps challenge that frame as well.

As one who teaches among those who actually make news, ads, and media, in general, I greatly admire you for attempting to promote forms of intercultural discourse that get us beyond the colonial tropes (or at least honestly grapple with them). It ain't easy.

Good luck with the project.

Mark Pedelty
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Subject: Re: [Mediantthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: Nancy Sullivan <nsullivan@global.net.pg>

Date: Thu, 12 Oct 2006 08:31:11 +1000

Tom--- I also applaud the impulse in this project, if it does indeed plan to demystify the so-called epistemological impact of globalization---and we see indigenes of remote places functioning in places like London or Manchester. This was of course pioneered by Jean Rousch in Paris with his Atelier Varan, bringing African filmmakers to train, and eventually Papua New Guineans to spend semester at the film school. The products of some of their experience are still surprising and excititng. Pengau nengo, baik Johnson and Kumain Kolain, for examples, made a film (Stolat) in the late 80's about a Czech migrant they met in the Paris metro, involving lots of food and wine at the latter's house and virtually no linguistic common ground! Atelier Varan awarded it a student prize at the time. Anyway, could be a great idea.
Nancy Sullivan

Subject: Re: [Mediantthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: "Peter I. Crawford" <interven@inet.uni2.dk>

Date: Thu, 12 Oct 2006 21:25:07 +0200

Dear Tom (and the list),

Welcome to the list. I find the whole debate regarding 'reverse' interesting and was just wondering whether you have looked into historical cases in which people or, indeed, anthropologists from so-called 'other'

societies/cultures have 'studied' the West. There is at least the case of the Indian anthropologist, Reddy, who conducted fieldwork in a small village community in eastern Jutland in Denmark, a case in which a film was made about it. I also faintly recall a couple of cases, involving the filming of it as well, in which people from Africa have visited the Arctic. I was simply wondering whether you had carried out any historical research on the whole topic of 'reverse anthropology'?

Regards,

Peter

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Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: simone abram <s.abram@sheffield.ac.uk>

Date: Thu, 12 Oct 2006 20:46:30 +0100

Dear all,

This is a conundrum which we must face up to - how to engage with anthropology in the public domain without feeling responsible for representations which we do not feel reflect our own understandings of anthropology. (e.g., when did people start referring to the Tribe as anthropology? The film makers claimed explicitly not to do so).

In relation to 'reverse anthropology', I suppose I am rather confused about what is supposed to be meant by 'reverse'. If you need to purify 'forward' anthropology as that conducted by Westerners ('whites'?) on Southerners ('others'), then you are defining anthropology in a most peculiar way. Do any of us think that is what anthropology is (and if so, have you read 'Anthropology at home', 'Writing culture' or anything published since?).

On the other hand, if anyone experiencing cultural difference is an anthropologist, then why did I bother reading all those scholarly texts in the first place? Is anyone who reads Austin a literary critic? Or anyone who goes to a concert a musician? Anthropology is not only about reflection, but informed reflection, in relation to a history of scholarly work, warts and all. In popularising it we wish to make people aware that this body of knowledge and scholarship exists, not pretend that people can 'know' it by watching a film.

I fully support the ambition of film makers to make sensitive and informed films about cultural difference, or about the lives of people in different parts of the world, which aim to break down persistent colonial prejudices. Perhaps, Tom, you could explain to us why you call them 'anthropological' films, and how your approach relates to our disciplinary ambitions. That might help us to be more clear about how our much of a consensus we can claim about our own notions of what anthropology is and what we mean by 'popularising' it.

Amicably,

Simone

Dr S Abram
Dept of Town and Regional Planning
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Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series
From: Michael Goldsmith <MIKEGOLD@waikato.ac.nz>
Date: Fri, 13 Oct 2006 15:06:40 +1300

Dear Tom and Mediaanthro Forum,

I was intrigued enough by this discussion to ponder setting some time aside to engage in it reflectively but I am now forced to take part with rather more urgency. I was rung earlier today by a journalist from a Sunday newspaper here in New Zealand who wanted an anthropologist to comment on a TV series currently under production as a joint venture between Channel 9 in Australia and Touchdown Productions in NZ. The latter is run by Julie Christie, who has made a lot of money out of pandering to the public appetite for programmes in the 'Survivors' mode. Apparently, she has paid for the rights to make a series based on one that is now screening or has recently screened in Germany. It involves sending out families from the 'developed world' into parts of the 'primitive world', filming their ordeal, and then bringing a family from the target group back to New Zealand to undergo a similar experience. Sound familiar?

The journalist specifically mentioned that a NZ family is right now acting out this scenario somewhere in Indonesia. He wasn't sure because Julie Christie was unable to remember where exactly it was taking place -- Sumatra, West Papua and Kalimantan were all possibilities! Such vagueness is probably a characteristic of this genre of one-size-fits-all primitivism. He was mostly concerned about the impact of the outsiders but I told him that the target group had probably long been in contact with the wider world and if they were able to control proceedings might even benefit materially. What really concerned me was the politics of representation, i.e., the likelihood that this series will perpetuate Western myths of exoticism.

I hope to report further developments but in the meantime would be very grateful for any information on the German TV series. Sorry I can't be more precise.

Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series
From: Carsten Wergin <wergin@uni-bremen.de>
Date: Fri, 13 Oct 2006 09:18:27 +0200

Dear Michael and everybody,

just a quick reply from Germany: yes, there is a TV show run bei one of the private stations in Germany, Sat 1. It es called "Wie die Wilden" (which translates to something like "Like the wild ones"). There are three German families, one in Togo, one in Namibia and one in Indonesia. It runs under the rubric "Comedy and Show". You will find video material, pictures etc on the internet. This is the webpage of the TV station:

http://www.sat1.de/comedy_show/wiediewilden/

if you google wie die wilden sat1, you'll also find that there is quite a wave of debate and protest on the whole thing going on. some also dealing with the questions you raise. Unfortunately not much written in English. I hope this will still be of some help.

Carsten

Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series
From: ElianeFF@aol.com
Date: Fri, 13 Oct 2006 05:05:27 EDT

Dear Michael and everybody,

In my opinion, the problem of the conception of such kind of TV show is that the participants mostly haven't the chance to defend themselves and fight against the perpetuated view of the 'noble savage'! In Brazil, last year in a soap opera ('The Moon told me' - A Lua me disse), the existence of the figure of a poor Indian girl working for a family caused much public discussion. Her image was a satirical one, showing a naïve and stupid Indian, reflecting and strengthening the prejudice of Brazilian society in relation to the indigenous culture. Many Indigenous got revolted with this and mentioned the bad influence of such a TV programme over the rest of Brazilian society. With this discussion they, the indigenous, created a space for society to think about racial prejudice, and were successful changing the working relationship of the programme directors, and from Globo TV Channel, with such kind of 'personage' and issues.

The question is: how to extinguish the eternal image of the 'noble savage'? It is important to give indigenous peoples the chance to express themselves and try to extinguish this image by themselves. But this aim can not be reached with a simple TV documentary series. It would be necessary a serious sequence of TV programmes, for instance, produced by indigenous peoples, to introduce us into their world view. This kind of TV programme already exists in Brazil inside of the project 'Video in the Villages' and shows many positive results (more information bellow*).

Best regards,

Eliane Fernandes Ferreira

University of Bremen

Doctoral Group 'The Processes and Dynamics in Transcultural Contexts'

Link of the project 'Video in the Villages':

http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/home_ingles.htm

* INDIAN PROGRAM 1, 2, 3, 4

'The project, together with TV Universidade do Mato Grosso (UFMT), realized an original event for the first time on Brazilian TV: giving television space for an authentic Indigenous program on public television. The students of the project participated actively in the elaboration and production of the programs without ever having contact with television production before.

Each Program 26 minutes, 1995/1996

Direction: Gloria Albués and Vincent Carelli

Edition: Tutu Nunes'

Source: Project 'Video in the Villages': Video Catalogue: Indian Program:

http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/home_ingles.htm

More information about the Soap Opera 'The moon told me' and the public discussions around it (in Portuguese):

http://www.lpp-uerj.net/olped/AcoesAfirmativas/exibir_opiniao.asp?codnoticias=4387

subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: Linda Duits <L.Duits@uva.nl>

Date: Fri, 13 Oct 2006 11:45:15 +0200

Dear Michael and list,

There is also a Dutch version of this show, called 'Groeten uit de rimboe' [Greetings from the Bush]. It was aired in 2005 by commercial network SBS 6. It featured two Dutch families and one Belgian. The Belgian family was aired earlier by Belgian commercial network VTM under the title 'Toast Kannibaal'. The three families went to Namibia, Indonesia and... Togo. Coincidence?

The Dutch website is

http://sbs6.sbs.nl/modules.php?name=sbs6_gal&site=sbs6&file=index&ga_subgalleryid=795,

it also mainly features pictures.

In 2006, SBS aired a follow up called 'Groeten Terug' [Greetings back], where two families from the visited tribes visited the Dutch families. The Dutch

families tried to show 'Dutch' culture, such as Sinterklaas. To us as scholars, this provides an insight into how the Dutch network defines, constructs and represents Dutchness.

Linda Duits

Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: Lauren Shweder Biel <lauren.s@nyu.edu>

Date: Fri, 13 Oct 2006 08:30:51 -0400

Linda Duits' observation about the fact that many of these shows are shot in the same areas brings up a series of questions for me:

- 1) Are they shot in EXACTLY the same places?
- 2) Is there an industry developing in particular villages that caters to these shows?
- 3) If so, is there a tacit agreement to "play primitive," as can be seen in many folkloric villages that cater to tourism around the world?

If this is the case, it would be amazing to do a series that films the filming. Shows how deals are brokered. Shows how people assume the parts that they think others want to see. It would be incredible to catch the breaks in their "primitive" frame (clothing choice when the cameras stop rolling, their own access and relationship to western media, etc.). In my mind, that would shake up assumptions to a mass audience and bring them more in touch with the realities of lived experience while highlighting some elements of image production within television.

I'd watch that show!

Of course there are precursors to this approach as well from the cannon of ethnographic film: most obviously John Marshall's later work where he films the filming of "The Gods Must be Crazy" and allows viewers to see some of the community response to those involved in the film (and to those involved in his own films if I'm remembering correctly - specifically to !Nai).

Lauren Shweder Biel

Ph.D. Candidate
New York University
Department of Anthropology
Program in Culture and Media

Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: ivan kwek <quack2@singnet.com.sg>

Date: Fri, 13 Oct 2006 22:44:47 +0800

Dear everyone

Some interesting questions all round have been raised - and they seem, in part, to underscore the importance of attending to "media-related practices", as discussed over the past weeks; in this case, in documentary filmmaking. This would entail not just an attention to how producers (taken to be shorthand for the various agents involved) go about their work of making their films, but also how their filmic subjects become filmic subjects ... as well as how they act, react, manipulate, perform, resist, etc.

I'm writing as both an anthropology student (with SOAS) and a former documentary producer/director who had once made such an "anthropological" film for television.

My subject - the Ifugaos in the Philippines. And rather like Tom, I was sure I wasn't about to go up the alley of exoticizing or romanticising them as noble savages, etc, or playing to the tropes of modern/tribal. Yet, as soon as the search for an "appropriate tribe" began, I found myself looking out for signs of "remoteness" - a spatial notion that really communicates the non-coevalness of the village I finally descended upon. Shots of the rugged terrain, long distances, and seeming isolation - and yes even the bad weather - all contributed to this sense of remoteness.

This remoteness is reinforced by the fact only my interpreter & one other person living there can speak English. (In the credits after the show, I acknowledged the interpreter, but it never occurred to me to feature him as an Ifugao like the others - maybe, because he was a law student in Manila).

Now, here's the best part. That first evening in the village, I was sitting with some Ifugao elders when one of them turned to me to ask if I wanted to film a ritual sacrifice. All we needed to do, he said, was to buy some livestock and they will do the rest. I was excited at the visual possibilities but told them that I rather they go about as they normally do - and declined the offer. Clearly the elder knew what will appeal to us, the cameras and our audiences.

But there is more: I found out, the next day, that the ritual sacrifice was already scheduled a while ago - and the elder was simply hoping we would foot the cost. Cunny old man indeed!

I could go on to describe the production experience to suggest further performative aspects of being the filmic native and how that plays into an all too familiar discourse.

Much as I tried not to, I had inadvertently exoticized the Ifugaos. Years later, in shame, I wanted to do the documentary again to make amends; this time, through a leading international distributor. I was told, in the process of writing up the proposal, that they don't do documentaries about natives "straight" anymore (Straight? This is hard to figure out but I believe they meant the "anthropological" look). They needed a new twist, an adventure story, for example.

I wonder, at a time when reality TV is obviously a favourite format, whether or not this so called "reverse anthropology" may well be better understood as a search for native gazing with a twist, driven perhaps by a hunger for new ways of packaging old wine.

Does it give voice to the "remote community"? Not on their own grounds, no. For whose questions and premises do they answer? Who authorises these voices, and under what conditions before they'll be edited in. Surely, the mere use of an interpreter and subtitles cannot adequately answer these questions.

I applaud Tom's sincerity and openness in his approach. I am afraid however that the "cultural exchange" he envisaged is a tad too optimistic. After all, hadn't we seen those "tribal" faces staring, distorted in amazement, close up into the camera lens (a sign of the West, of the audience)? Transporting them as "visitors" to the West is unlikely to make them look any better. Their subject positions as "visitors" from some remote land will surely inform how their reverse "anthropological" thoughts about the West will be understood. Yet, it is apparent that their gaze is not the same as that of the (usually white, and often male) anthropologist entering their remote lands.

Ivan Kwek

PhD Candidate, SOAS

Lecturer,
School of Communication & Information,
Nanyang Technological Univ
Singapore

John,

Thanks for inviting me to share my two cents.

First, talk is cheap and I have read enough treatments and scripts to know that isn't always what winds up on the screen.

There are two key elements here that can not be ignored that are always a part of these kinds of projects. First is the interjection of editorial control by the commissioning editors, or programmers, those who are funding the project for broadcast. Bad things can happen in spite of the intent of the filmmakers.

Second, TIME... these types of projects demand that a budget and timetable is adhered to, story lines get forced (or falsely created if exciting stuff isn't happening fast enough)...

To earn "trust" for any participants in a project like this takes time, a lot of time. It does not seem that there will be ample time invested to actually allow for true trust to be established.

The really fantastic films (they are few and far between) made with the idea of fostering cross-cultural understanding, have taken years to make.

So, this project does not sound terribly different from many others of this ilk that have been attempted before.

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Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series

From: Michael Goldsmith <MIKEGOLD@waikato.ac.nz>

Date: Wed, 18 Oct 2006 21:43:21 +1300

Dear Ivan, Lauren, Linda, Eliane, Carsten, Tom and list,

Thanks for all the comments and very useful information about the documentary/reality series that shed light on the Touchdown series in NZ and which I will need to follow up. I've been snowed under with other things so this is a very quick preliminary response:

EUR The newspaper story did appear and did report my concerns reasonably accurately (a first in my personal experience).

EUR It seems the series will be called 'Ticket to the Tribes' and it is a direct spin-off (if not a direct translation) from the series screened in Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, etc .

EUR The German concept was developed by Eyeworks TV which merged with Touchdown earlier this year.

EUR A family from the South Island is currently being filmed 'with the Mentawai tribe', having trekked through 'Indonesian jungle' to get there. I understand Mentawai people actually live on islands off the W coast of Sumatra but would appreciate any other information people have.

Thanks in advance.

Michael Goldsmith

Subject: Re: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series
From: Carsten Wergin <cwergin@gmx.de>
Date: Wed, 18 Oct 2006 11:14:34 +0200

Dear Everybody,

the German family in Indonesia also lived with the Mentawai, on an island called Siberut.

http://www.sat1.de/comedy_show/wiediewilden/die_staemme/mentawai/

No wonder, after the merger of Touchdown and Eyeworks. This very much leads to what Lauren already suggested, that all of these shows are shot in the same place with quite an industry behind it and developing.

Yours,
Carsten

Subject: [Medianthro] 'Reverse Anthropology' documentary series
From: "Tulius, J." <J.Tulius@let.leidenuniv.nl>
Date: Wed, 18 Oct 2006 14:27:51 +0200

Dear everyone,

I got the following information from one of my friends, since information is in concern of Mentawai, an ethnic group and islands of which I come from. I have involved in similar cases as what you are discussing at the moment. I had been contacted by the producer of Eyeworks in the Netherlands. I met the Eyeworks producer from Belgium in Mentawai when I did a fieldwork for my research. It seemed like that Eyeworks successfully boardcasted the first version of its programme in the Netherlands on the so-called "Groeten Uit de Rimbo" of which a Dutch family went to Mentawai and "tried" to live just as how the Mentawaiians do. Before the Dutch family was invovled in this programme, a Belgium family had been participated on it. However, the result was not as how the producer expected. There were conflicts between the producer and the Belgium family. Translation of texts on the programmes, either in Belgium or in Netherlands is improperly done in some significant part. In the Netherlands, I gave my critics to the producer of the programme when he and his collega came to visit me in Leiden, asking of the possibility of inviting the mentawaiians to visit Holland. His response upon my critics was that his productions are not as the same as National Geography Channel's. On the way of producing the second series of Groeten Uit de Rimbo, which was titled Groeten Terug, Eyeworks in the Netherlands asked my involvement on looking at translation and scenes of which part would be broadcasted and which part would not since I protested the idea of bringing up the Mentawaiians to Holland for the same programme due to the fact that the programme did not represent what and how it should be, as told to me by the producer of the programme, which was to bring a better cultural understanding of two different backgrounds of families. Since my critics were considered by Eyeworks

less seriously, I did not want to get involved in thier bussiness. I informed Indonesian Embassy about what I figured out in the programme in concern of Eyeworks would like to invite a mentawai family to come to Holland. The Mentawaians residing in interior of Siberut have no any official document that can be used to apply thier passports. But they still could make it to have passports. How was that possible? Money spoke. Thus, the Mentawai family arrived at the Netherlands. I am against the idea of the mentawaiians to come to the Netherlands, but I just do not agree upon the fact that the programme did not pursue the initial idea as what the producer once told to me about. My initiative to inform Indonesian Embassy resulted significant efforts. Scenes of the second programme were better than the first one, less sensations more to reality shows, though the translation was still remaining the biggest problem, at least to me.

After the second programme of Eyeworks ended, a group of people from Franch went to Mentawai to make similar programme. They visited the same area, a touristic place, called Rereiket. Rereiket is a valley of Siberut Island. I know the area and some families that are usually visited by either common tourists or filmmakers. I was a tourist guide myself before working for Siberut Biosphere Reserve of UNESCO project for two years. I particapted in making of several film documentaries in Mentawai as well for Franch TV, Discovery, NGC, and Channel NewsAsia. Since 1923, there are about 40 film documentaries have been produced in the similar scheme. I would like to explore and study the results of all film documentaries on Mentawai, however due to my engagement on my phd project on oral literature and its correlations to land claims and the notion of belonging in current situation on the islands of Mentawai, my wish is still in the state of idea.

I would like to get some response of you if you are in the same interests with me.

Best regards,

Juniator Tulus

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PhD Candidate

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