

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY  
European Studies Faculty  
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**Doctoral thesis resume:**

*Ethnographic film and anthropological knowledge. Visually  
researching calendar based ceremonials.*

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### *I. Argument. Questions about Ethnographic Film*

*„The effort of thinking cinematically about ethnography or thinking ethnographically through film results in a new and different understanding of each of these disciplines.” (Heider 2006, p. 7)*

The above sentence explains best the intention and the hypothesis of the paper. My intention is to critically evaluate the common efforts of anthropologists and filmmakers, who initiated and carried on the dialogue between anthropology and film. As a result of this epistemological dialogue, the term that has been imposed at the beginning of the sixties was *ethnographic film*. Although deprived from a generally accepted definition by theorists and practitioners, the term refers in its broadest way to that particular kind of film which, in one way or another reflects *ethnographic understanding*. Ethnographic film can be regarded as a subgenre of anthropology and more specifically visual anthropology which contains also the study of visual systems or ethnographic pictorialism and photography. However ethnographic film is also considered a subgenre of documentary film. This research proposes an understanding of ethnographic film as a genre that can be understood in between its two epistemological models, which have a specific contribution at the construction of

ethnographic film as a particular research field of “ethnographic realities”. Consequently, this thesis will explore the ways in which ethnographic research is being done through film and the relevance of the whole process to anthropology, or in other words will try to answer the question: *how is anthropological knowledge built through film in comparison with the one that written anthropology constructs?* Or, instead of asking what is the degree of ethnographicness from a film or another, I’d rather question together with Heider: “*How closely can films approach the highest standards and goals of ethnography? How can films present information that written ethnographies cannot? How can the (visual capability of) film complement the (lexical capability of) ethnography?*” (Heider 2006, p. 2-3)

These questions, which I hope I can answer in this dissertation come from a personal ambition of understanding the theoretical methodology in accordance with the praxis of fieldwork. My motivation is to produce ethnographic films which are relevant and meaningful from the point of view of the anthropological knowledge it proposes. Consequently, the practical part of the paper will offer a series of ethnographic films, made by myself, in the context of researching calendar based ceremonials, from various regions of rural Romania.

## *II. Ethnographic film and the model of anthropology. Representational Crisis and Visual Anthropology*

In this chapter I explored the connection between ethnographic film and its anthropological model. More precisely, I am looking at the various ways in which ethnographic film is influenced by a specific anthropological critical mode of approaching the field. For this reason I considered it useful to analyze the ways of manifestations of the critique of the ethnographic method in the context of the crisis of representation in anthropology. Consequently, I’ll try to understand the reevaluation of the ethnographic method starting from a very specific characteristic of written and visual anthropology, the problem of ethnographic description in the context of the crisis of representation.

The problem of representation is comparatively discussed from the perspective of visual and written anthropology. If in the case of written anthropology, the crisis of representation manifested itself in the 80’s, as a critique of anthropological practice and colonial nineteenth century anthropology but also as a formal critique of power relations embedded in the anthropological writing, in the case of ethnographic film, the problem of representation preceded and influenced in many ways mainstream anthropology, starting

from the beginnings of ethnographic filmic experiments in the sixties, mostly through the work of Jean Rouch, David MacDougall and others. The comparative approach follows the influences and the methodological juxtapositions which academic literature and theoretical developments in the area of literary and visual anthropology share.

For exemplifying the theoretical possibilities that offers the debates about anthropological representation and ethnographic description, I have chosen to discuss the implications of it for gender studies in relation to visual anthropology. Starting from the idea of a communicative paradigm in anthropology, I'll explore the method of reflexivity in gender studies and visual anthropology in order to compare its relevance for possible theoretical developments for both subfields of anthropology and mainstream anthropology itself.

The crisis of representation provoked epistemological and methodological revolutions in the academic discipline of anthropology. The phenomena of representational crisis can not only be reduced to a renewal of writing or mainstream theory of anthropology. The issue of representation informs and is informed by all fields and subfields of anthropology. Today no ethnography can be conceived without keeping in mind the ideological political historical and institutional, gender issues and most importantly the reflexivity of the researcher and the subjects involved in the production of anthropological knowledge. Finally the most important achievement of theorizing representation in anthropology is concerned with the ethical consequences of the ways in which we construct produce and share anthropological knowledge for readers or in the case of ethnographic film for viewers.

### *III. Film and the Model of Cinema. Visual Exploration Modes in Ethnographic Documentary Film*

*„Ethnographic filmmaking owes as much to cinema's rapidly evolving forms as written anthropology does to styles of literary and scientific discourse that have developed over several centuries.” (MacDougall 1998, p. 184)*

In this chapter my purpose is to talk about the methodological influences that the model of cinema imposes upon ethnographic film. Consequently the chapter tends to identify the specific field of documentary film and the potentiality of the cinematic medium for documenting and representing reality. Moreover, various techniques and montage strategies, the predefined modes of documentary film will be analyzed and exemplified in order to

identify the categories, model, and modes of documentary and their influence upon ethnographic film (or the other way around).

The methodological importance of the problem of ethics as well as the debates regarding the relation between science and aesthetics will be interpreted from the perspective of the methodological constraints (and why not liberties) which these impose upon ethnographic film. Establishing the methodological relations between ethnographic film and documentary film will be useful in understanding the the most important modes of ethnographic film like: *observational mode, participatory mode, sensorial mode and applied mode*. Most of the time, the modes of ethnographic film function as theoretical framework for various methodological approaches. These modes are a consequence of the theoretical debates that have been going on for more than a half of century of existence of the academic field of visual anthropology. In this chapter I analyze these debates, without the pretence of exhaustively treating the subject matter, but with regard to the epistemological influences in what concerns the issue of visual representation and the production of anthropological knowledge trough film.

Ethnographic film presents itself as a mature and complex field worthy of a complementary status in respect to mainstream anthropology. Its technological, scientific/artistic complex methodological aspects of ethnographic film presents today more and more interest for the academic and anthropological scene of inquiry, in a world dominated by globalization and the media world in which we are living in. I believe that visual ethnographic representation has, at least the same importance as written words representation. For this reason the necessity of a theoretical journey, critically assumed, in the area of methodology of visual anthropology is not only a necessary preprement for any anthropologist but an intellectual responsibility towards the critical understandings of mechanisms of visual representation in contemporary society.

#### *IV. Ethnographic Film and Anthropological Writing*

*„Film can never replace the written word in anthropology, but anthropologists are made conscious by their field experiences of the limitations which word impose upon their discipline. We are beginning to discover how film can fill some blind spots.” (MacDougall 1998, p. 195)*

In this chapter I address the question of how written or filmic mode constructs ethnographic description and anthropological knowledge. I found that it was useful to

questions the importance of the anthropological gaze in the process of ethnographic description consequently I questioned the ways of looking with a camera and ways of looking while the final intention is writing. Looking beyond the poetics of the anthropological gaze, I made a distinction between ethnographic film and ethnographic writing as two different languages, or as two different semiotic systems which propose two different manners of building and understanding anthropological knowledge.

The comparison concentrates on the formal differences between the two semiotic systems in the context of anthropological research focusing on what film can bring more to the initial project of anthropology. Although I am certain that the two modes of anthropology use methods and propose anthropological knowledge in a different manner, the option of thinking them separately is not prolific for anthropological research. I find more useful the complementary approach towards film and written anthropology, in the sense in which both products can reveal different aspects of the same problem, and consequently to bring more anthropological awareness to a specific theme.

In order to exemplify the complementarity of the two anthropological modes I have chosen a case study which deals with a film and written study on the same subject. This presents the results of the research upon the phenomena of storytelling in a Roma community from Chelița Maramureș, a research focused on the stories of Ion Roman (Broscatu). The results of this anthropological fieldwork two products about the same subject: the film *Broscatu The Storyteller* (2011) and the written study *Fictionalization Mechanisms and the Stories of Ion Roman*. After the presentation of the two anthropological products, the paper concentrates on the comparison between the two and the ways in which they propose anthropological knowledge on the same subject. If the written study finds its fulfillment in the proposal of a theoretical scheme which could lead to a better understanding of Ion Roman's fictionalization mechanisms, the film proposes a more direct and reflexive account into Broscatu's stories and world. In other words, if the written study proposes anthropological knowledge which focuses on the theoretical value which the conceptual and abstract analysis brings to the theme of research, the film proposes another kind of knowledge which brings into discussion the representational process of doing anthropological fieldwork with a video camera.

#### *V. Visually Researching Calendar Based Ceremonials. A Personal Perspective*



In this last practical part of the paper I am more interested in the praxis of ethnographic film the way I've experience in the field with a video camera and at the editing suite. The results consist in five films that I made in the last years about several based ceremonials across the rural parts of Romania. My purpose here is to talk about the ways of addressing anthropological questions in film/video research, technological issues, methodology montage etc. Moreover, based on my own experience I also intend to bring into discussion some practical suggestions of researching calendar based ceremonials. Here I treat subjects like, fieldwork prospect, filming with and without a camera, choosing the subject, research questions, the techniques involved in the filming and the necessary equipment, ways of looking, editing solutions and so on and so further.

I'll treat the ethnographic films attached at the end of this paper as autonomous case studies and not as an annex to writing. I present for each ethnographic film product the ways in which I kept in mind some important factors throughout the process of production. As a result, I center around the informed anthropological conscience, coming from the field of anthropology, discussed in the second chapter, as well as the aesthetical and formal conventions of the documentary film, discussed in the tried chapter. I also write about films in terms of *fieldnotes* revealing some methodological aspects that occurred while producing the films. "*The filmnotes*" also focuses on the relevance of each film for producing anthropological content as relevant and as valid as academic text.

## *VI. Epilogue*

Being a hybrid genre, ethnographic film finds itself at the epistemological intersection of two main fields, anthropology and documentary film. The discussed domain borrows methods theories and models, belonging to both of the fields, consequently my questions concentrated upon understanding these borrowings, juxtapositions and methodological shifts that eventually created the premises for a new academic discipline as visual anthropology and ethnographic film.

Initially starting from a subgenre of documentary cinema and mainstream written anthropology, ethnographic film progressively restructured and complemented its epistemological models. In the case of documentary film ethnographic film, as initially a subgenre documentary in the sixties started to influence the nonfiction genre of cinema from its specific observational, participatory and reflexive modes of ethnographic film. Also a

main contribution brought by ethnographic film to the development of documentary is a specific anthropological ethical conscience, developed after the eighties, when anthropologists and visual ethnographers understood better the responsibility of the representational practices that they must have.

I believe that visual representation does not restructure anthropological knowledge in a reformative way but it becomes a complementary mode, a method more adequate to represent some specific characteristics of man and his social environment that writing, due to its formal and institutional limitations, cannot. If written mode is more adequate to abstract description of social structures, due to its more capable of resuming, concluding and summarizing the visual/filmic mode is more effective into describing/depicting sensorial realities by co-presenting gestures mimics and the environment in the same time (MacDougall 2006). Despite the differences, I believe a fruitful relation will consist in assuming the complementarities of the two modes of anthropological discourse. The consequences of such a statement may require a need of diversifying the methods of anthropological research, as well as new educational bases for anthropologist to follow (the visual mode requires different skills and technical preparation). Moreover, I believe that new methods of academically evaluating the visual media are needed.

Finally I trust that anthropology understood in a highly visualizing world that the written text can not be the only way of representing and constructing knowledge about mankind, moreover MacDougall's critique in what he understood as an evacuation of the human being from the anthropological text, reconsiders a discipline which had a marginal status in comparison to mainstream.

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- Age of Reason, The*, David McDougall, Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University, Australia, 87 min., 2004
- American Family, An*, Craig Gilbert, National Education Television (NET), 12 episoade de 1 oră, 1972
- Arrival of a Train (Arrivée d'un train)*, August și Louis Lumière, Franța, 1 min., 1895
- Awareness*, David and Judith McDougall, Fieldwork Films, Australia, 67 min., 2010
- Ax Fight, The*, Timothy Asch și Napoleon Chagnon, Yanomamö series, Venezuela/ Statele Unite, 30 min., 1975
- Baraka*, Ron Fricke, Statele Unite ale Americii, 96 min., 1992
- Bataille sur le grand fleuve*, Jean Rouch, Niger, 33 min., 1952
- Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potyomkin)*, Sergei M. Einstein, Uniunea Sovietică, 75 min., 1925
- Before Spring*, Joris Ivens, China, 38 min., 1958
- Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt)*, Walter Ruttmann, Germania, 53 min., 1927
- Bicycle Thieves (a.k.a The Bicycle Thief) (Ladri di Biciclette)*, Vittorio De Sica, Italia, 93 min., 1948
- Black Is, Black Ain't (Black Is ... Black Ain't: A Personal Journey through Black Identity)*, Marlon T. Riggs, 88 min., 1995
- Blair Witch Project, The*, Daniel Myrick și Eduardo Sanchez, 80 min., 1999
- Blood of the Beasts (La sang des bêtes)*, Georges Franju, Franța, 22 min., 1949
- Bon Voyage*, Alfred Hitchcock, British Ministry of Information, Regatul Unit al Marii Britanii/Franța, 50 min., 1995
- Bowling for Columbine*, Michel Moore, 119 min., 2002
- Bridge, The*, Joris Ivens, 11 min., 1928
- Bunuong's Birth Practices*, Tommi Mendel, Tigertoda Productions, Elveția, 50 min., 2010
- Capitalism: A Love Story*, Michael Moore, 127 min., 2009
- Chasse à l'hippopotame*, Jean Rouch cu Pierre Ponty și Jean Sauvy, Niger, 50 min., 1947
- Chasse au lion à l'arc, La*, Jean Rouch, Niger, 1964

*Chile, Obstinate Memory*, Patricio Guzmán, Canada/ Franța, 53 min., 1997  
*Chronicle of a Summer (Cheonique d'une été)*, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, Franța, 90 min., 1960  
*Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures, SUA, 119 min., 1941  
*Cocorico! Monsieur Poulet*, Jean Rouch, Niger, 93 min., 1974  
*Curse of the Hedgehog, The (Blestemul ariciului)*, Dumitru Budrală, România, 93 min., 2005  
*Danube Exodus*, Péter Forgács, Ungaria, 60 min., 1998  
*Dead Birds*, Robert Gardner, West New Guinea/Statele Unite, 83 min., 1963  
*Don't Look Back*, D.A. Pennebaker, Marea Britanie/Statele unite, 96 min., 1967  
*Doon School Chronicles*, David McDougall, Centre for Cross-Cultural Reaseach, Australian National University, Australia, 140 min., 2000  
*Duwayne Masure*, Herh Di Gioia și David Hancock, University of California at Los Angeles Motion Pictures Division, MFA Thesis Film, SUA, 40 min., 1971  
*Eye of the Day, The*, Leonard Retel Helmrich, Olanda, 94 min., 2001  
*Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michel Moore, 122 min., 2004  
*Flower Bridge, The (Podul de flori)*, Thomas Ciulei, România, 87 min., 2008  
*Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara, The*, Errol Morris, 107 min., 2003  
*Forest Gump*, Robert Zemeckis, 142 min., 1994  
*Forest of Bliss*, Robert Gardner, India/Statele Unite, 91 min., 1985  
*Gandhi's Children*, David McDougall, Australia, 185 min., 2008  
*Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*, Merian C. Cooper și Ernest B. Schoedsack, 70 min., 1925  
*Grațian*, Thomas Ciulei, România, 50 min., 2005  
*Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog, Canada/Statele Unite, 104 min., 2005  
*Home*, Arhus-Bertrand, Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Franța, 120 min., 2009  
*Hospital*, Frederick Wiseman, 84 min., 1970  
*Hunters, The*, John Marshall și Robert Gardner, 72 min., 1957  
*Imagining Indians*, Victor Masayesva Jr., 90 min., 1993  
*In and Out of Africa*, Ilisa Barbash și Lucien Taylor, Franța/Statele Unite, 59 min., 1992  
*Jaguar*, Jean Rouch, Les Films de la Pléiades, Franța, 93 min., 1954/ 1966  
*Jane*, D. A Pennebaker, Richard Leacock și Drew Associates, 54 min, 1962

*Kenya Boran*, partea 1 și 2, David McDougall și James Blue, seria Faces of Change, 33 minute fiecare, 1974

*Kinopravda (Cinema Truth)*, Dziga Vertov, Uniunea Sovietică, 81 min., 1925

*L'Age d'or (The Golden Age)*, Luis Buñuel, Franța, 60 min., 1930

*L'Avventura*, Michelangelo Antonioni, Italia, 142 min., 1960

*La terra trema: episodio del mare*, Luciano Visconti, Universalial, Italia, 160 min., 1948

*Last Waltz, The*, Martin Scorsese, 117 min., 1978

*Les Maîtres Fous*, Jean Rouch, Les Films de la Pléiades, Franța, 30 min., 1955

*Lorang's Way*, David and Judith McDougall, Fieldwork Films, Australia, 70 min., 1979

*Louisiana Story*, Robert Flaherty, 75 min., 1948

*Man with a Movie Camera, The*, Dziga Vertov, Uniunea Sovietică, 103 min., 1929

*March of the Penguins (La marche de l'empereur)*, Luc Jaquet, Statele Unite ale Americii, 80 min., 2005

*March of the Penguins*, Luc Jaquet, Franța, 80 min., 2005

*Moana: A Romance of the South Seas*, Robert J. Flaherty, Samoa/Statele Unite, 26 min., 1927

*Moi, Un Noir*, Jean Rouch, Les Films de la Pléiades, Franța, 70 min., 1957

*N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman*, John Marshall, seria Odyssey/PBS, Deșertul Kalahari (Namibia, Angolia)/Statele Unite, 58 min., 1980

*Nanook of the North*, Robert Flaherty, Canada/Statele Unite, 55 min., 1922

*New Boys, The*, David McDougall, Centre for Cross-Cultural Reaseach, Australian National University, Australia, 100 min., 2003

*Night and Fog (Nuit et brouillard)*, Alain Resnais, Polonia/Franța, 31 min., 1955

*Night Mail*, Harry Watt și Basil Wright, 30 min., 1936

*Nuer, The*, Hilary Harris, George Breidenbach și Robert Gardner, Etiopia/Statele Unite, 75 min., 1970

*Paisà*, Roberto Rossellini, OFI, Italia, 115 min., 1946

*Peter and Jane Flint*, David Hancock și Herh Di Gioia, The Vermont Center for Cultural Studies Inc., SUA, 120 min., 1975

*Photo Wallahs*, David and Judith McDougall, Fieldwork Films, Australia, 59 min., 1991

*Quest (Căutare)*, Ionuț Pițurescu, România, 30 min., 2010

*Rain (Regen)*, Joris Ivens, Olanda, 14 min., 1929

*Reassemblage*, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Senegal/Statele Unite, 40 min., 1982

*Revolution Will Not Be Televised, The (a.k.a. Inside the Coup)*, Kim Bartley și Donnacha O'Brian, Irlanda/Olanda/Statele Unite, 74 min., 2002

*Rivers of Sand*, Robert Gardner (cu George Breidenbach și Hilary Harris), Film Study Center, Harvard University, SUA, 84 min., 1975

*Roger and Me*, Michael Moore, 87 min., 1989

*Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta)*, Roberto Rossellini, Italia, 100 min., 1945

*Salesman*, Albert și David Maysles, Maysles Films Inc., SUA, 91 min., 1968

*Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker, Franța, 100 min., 1982

*SchoolScapes*, David McDougall, CCR Media Works/ Fieldwork Films, Australia, 77 min., 2007

*Sheep Rushes*, Ilisa Barbash și Lucien Castaing-Taylor, SUA, (*Hell Roaring Creek*, 19 min.; *The High Trail*, 5 min.; *Fine and Coarse*, 9 min.), 2007

*Shooting Freetown*, Kieran Hanson, Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, Marea Britanie, 29 min., 2011

*Sicko*, Michael Moore, 123 min., 2007

*Song of Ceylon*, Basil Wright, Ceylon, Marea Britanie, 40 min., 1934

*Standard Operating Procedure*, Errol Morris, 116 min., 2008

*Stori Tumbuna: Ancestors' Tales*, Paul Wolfram, Noua Zeelandă, 80 min., 2011

*Super Size Me*, Morgan Spurlock, 100 min., 2004

*Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, Trinh T. Minh-ha, 108 min., 1989

*Sweetgrass*, Ilisa Barbash și Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Film Study Center, Harvard University, SUA, 115 min., 2008

*Tempus de Baristas*, David McDougall, Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico/ Fieldwork Films/ BBC Television, Italia, Australia, Marea Britanie, 100 min., 1993

*The 400 Blows (Les quatre cent coups)*, François Truffaut, Films du Carrosse / SEDIF, Franța, 94 min., 1959

*Them And Me / The Sky In A Garden - Two Films By Stephane Breton*, Facets Multi-Media, Inc., 125 min., 2001

*Tourou et Bitti: Les Tambours d'avant*, Jean Rouch, Niger, 12 min., 1971

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*Trip to the Moon, A (Voyage dans la lune)*, George Méliès, Franța, 14 min., 1902  
*Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens)*, Leni Riefenstahl, Germania, 107 min.,  
 1935  
*Truman Show, The*, Peter Weir, 103 min., 1998  
*Umberto D.*, Vittorio de Sica, Dear films, Italia, 89 min., 1952  
*Un Chien Andalou (An Andalusian Dog)*, Luis Buñuel și Salvador Dali, Franța, 16  
 min., 1929  
*Vent d'est*, Jean-Luc Godard, 92 min., 1970  
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 Lumière, Franța, 1 min., 1895  
*We Want (U) to Know*, Ella Pugliese și Nou Va, The Khmer Institute for Democracy,  
 Geegor Matuschek – bildsturz.tv, Germania, 54 min., 2010  
*Wedding Camels*, David and Judith McDougall, Turkana Conversations Trilogy,  
 Kenya/Australia, 108 min., 1980  
*Wedding Camels, The*, David and Judith McDougall, Rice University Media Center,  
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*With Morning Hearts*, David McDougall, Centre for Cross-Cultural Reaseach,  
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## Filmographic Archive:

1. Broscatu The Storyteller 2011
2. The Street Musician 2012
3. Looking at themselves: Babaluda Luda 2011
4. The Deer from Cucuteni 2012
5. „Călușerii” din Târsa 2010
6. The Tree of the Dead Ceanu Mare 2011
7. The Tree of the Dead Mociu 2012