
10th INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF SCIENTIFIC, TECHNICAL AND ART FILMS - University of Brussels February 1988

●*VIDEO: Impi Yombango, VHS PAL 36min, Producers:- Christo Doherty, Craig Doria and Jeanne Prinsloo. Supervision:- Costas Criticos. 1986.*

●*VIDEO: Community Arts Workshop: An Alternative, VHS PAL 18min, Producer:- Ansuya Chetty. Supervision:- Costas Criticos. 1987.*

Through the eye of the camera: a struggle to define community video process.

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This paper describes in brief the production process of two videos produced for local organisations, the Community Arts Workshop and the Catholic Oblate Order. The producers are post-graduate students in the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit of the University of Natal, Durban, who participated in an attachment programme which develops media skills through praxis and engagement in community media.

MEDIA ATTACHMENT PROGRAMME

Media Attachment Programme (MAP) is a programme based in the Media Resource Centre, Department of Education, University of Natal, Durban. This centre was established to serve the media needs of workers in formal and non-formal education who are disadvantaged by a lack of media skills and resources. The centre operates on a self-help basis with visitors using computers, light-tables, copy-cameras, etc. In addition to this service MAP offers training to participants in an attachment relationship. The participant is attached to MAP for the duration of a production requested by a community or-

ganisation. A production team is composed of a facilitator, the participants and the client. This team employs democratic practice to ensure that the participants develop media skills and that the clients production brief is fulfilled. Unlike dominant production practice MAP is process rather than product orientated.

CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES UNIT

The Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit (CCSU) works in conjunction with the attachment programme (MAP) of the Media Resource Centre in facilitating video produc-

tion by students registered for the two Honours courses in the Unit: Film/Video and Cultural Production and African Philosophy, Ethnographic Film. These are mainly theoretically and historically based courses premised on the materialist dictum that "In the cinema the communication of knowledge is attendant upon the production of knowledge about the cinema" (J.P. Fargier). Having learnt about the history of documentary and the need to engage dominant codes, conventional production practices and the idea of a passive homogeneous audience, students are encouraged to put their theoretically-derived knowledge into practice by producing videos responding to briefs provided by community organisations engaged in democratic struggle. In this way student producers are preparing the ground for a dialectical redefinition not only of video/filmic codes, but are establishing participatory (producer-client) production practices and a new interactive relationship with their audiences.

COMMUNITY ARTS WORKSHOP: AN ALTERNATIVE

This video attempts firstly to describe the activities of the Community Arts Workshop (CAW), a privately organised (as opposed to state-run) non-formal art education centre, and secondly to locate the workshop within the context of an apartheid society. It was commissioned by the workshop in June 1986 for the purposes of raising funds.

The production process employed differed quite strongly from that typical of a commercial production unit where the client is simply presented with the final product but does not participate in the actual process of production. In the CAW video members of the client organisation were involved to varying extents at all stages of the production. This participation went beyond merely facilitating access to source material. We were accompanied on each shoot by either Andries Botha, the Workshop's director or Bruno Brincat, one of the Workshop's co-ordinators who then gave us some idea of their areas of interest. Thus although we were not initially presented with a clear brief, our interaction with Andries and Bruno and our informal discussions with them on each shoot set up a process through which

the programme was formalised.

Once the shooting was over, Andries gave us a written account of the Workshop's activities and what it was trying to achieve. He defined the Workshop as a contingency plan in a divided society. Although his account was quite comprehensive, it didn't explain how the ideas he presented and the visual material we'd recorded should be related to one another. Nevertheless the fact that he was acquainted with what had been shot meant that even if only subconsciously, his account, which formed the basis for the editing script, was to some extent shaped by his knowledge of the visual material.

Once the editing script was completed we produced a rough edit using an old edit-suite available in the department and in the process damaged several of our source tapes. This edit-suite eventually broke down leaving us with no alternative but to use editing facilities in the Audio Visual Centre on our Campus. There were two problems with this. Firstly, we were now restricted to working within office hours. Secondly, the technically sophisticated equipment we now had access to was made available in an obstructive manner. This was because the largely commercial orientation of the Centre, whose work practices were firmly entrenched within the dominant ideological discourse, resulted in little support for community oriented initiatives such as MAP.

The rough edit was shown to Andries and Bruno who requested various changes. These changes involved not just simply the rearrangement of parts but also changes in the narration itself. This meant reworking the script and narration and making a recording of the new narration. Bruno and Andries' intervention thus resulted in a delay in the completion of the production but to have done otherwise would have implied denying them any real involvement in the editing stage. This should not however have restrained us from being more critical of the changes they requested.

The following is one example of where we could have been more assertive: Andries and Bruno had felt that the obstacle facing the workshop's programme of creative reconciliation in the separation due to the apartheid system needed to be emphasised quite strongly. In

response to this the narration was extended to explain the problem of distance as an obstacle to communication. Although the narration acknowledges the fact that this distance is an emotional as well as a physical one, on the whole very little is said about the very real problem of racial prejudice among fellow South Africans. Thus the preferred reading of this section of the video is that the problems facing the workshop's endeavour to function as a pretext for association will be solved by expanding the resources of the organisation to enable people from outlying areas to participate in its programme.

In the light of the fact that the preceding paragraphs create the impression of client participation in the process of production, several points need to be made about the nature of this participation. Firstly, Andries and Bruno neither operated the cameras nor did the editing. Hence their role was more consultative and facilitative rather than participatory.

Secondly, apart from Andries and Bruno, rank and file members and staff of the CAW were not part of the decision-making process. Hence in a programme such as MAP, client participation can usually amount to little more than the participation of people at the top of the organizational hierarchy. In this case the problem is more a reflection of the way the CAW is itself structured rather than any fundamental weakness in MAP. We could however have played a more facilitative role in the process of the development of greater democracy within the organisation. For example, prior to recording a particular creative activity we could have held discussions with the students concerned about how they should be represented. Their experience of some level of democracy in their interaction with us would have alerted them to the inadequacy of it in their own organisation.

Having dealt with the process of production it needs to be pointed out that the content of the product that emerged also differed from that typical of a commercial production team. Two components will be discussed briefly: the narration and the music.

With regard to the narration, variations in the voice level from one point to another created problems for the editing. This was a consequence of using, instead of a professional nar-

rator, a member of the Workshop, Riedwaan Kimmie, who had had no previous narrating experience. However as someone who was part of the workshop he was not alienated from the content of the narration and thus felt confident to change the wording in parts to make it more consistent with his own style of expression.

The background music used through a significant proportion of the soundtrack was produced and performed by the Workshop's music students and recorded at the Workshop. It thus lacks the sophistication typical of a professional group's recording in a sound studio. However it is precisely through its rawness that it is able to capture something of the dynamic rhythm of the Workshop. Hence at the level of aural coding the soundtrack serves effectively to enhance the image of the workshop as, far from a clearly defined entity bound by convention, a project which in its constant evolution indexes the nature of the society in which it arises

IMPI YOMBANGO

In June 1986 MAP was commissioned to produce a video on 'Faction fighting' in Natal, its underlying causes and current manifestations. The production team was composed of three CCSU students, the MAP facilitator and a representative of the Catholic Oblate Order. However the client unfortunately did not take much advantage of the opportunity to participate actively in the production process. It was produced for screening at an international conference of the Catholic Oblate Order in Rome in 1986. 'Faction fighting', a blanket term used loosely by journalists and government alike, describes conflict among black people ranging from drunken brawls to long-standing feuds. Incidents termed as such occur widely in the Natal region.

At first sight this commission offered an ideal opportunity for participatory video practices which facilitate an active involvement in the decision-making process by subject 'actors', client and production team. However, the final form Impi Yombango took results from the restrictive conditions imposed on it. A state of emergency was declared days after the initial brief was accepted. Under the emergency regulations no information that pertains to un-

rest may be recorded or published. Production immediately became a clandestine process.

One of the production team was harassed by security police in phone calls and at the same time the producer of the programme commissioned by the Transvaal Catholic Oblate Order was detained. Consequently, certain areas with a heavy police presence were out of bounds and the inability to spend any length of time in any area effectively prevented any chance of winning the confidence of the subjects. The people involved in these types of conflict employ their own code of justice. Indeed, this type of conflict often works to the advantage of the state as it helps to divide and distract the oppressed. The code of silence that exists between warring factions in areas like the Msinga area depicted in the video operates to the exclusion of legal pro-

cedures and presents the very real danger of reprisals to those offering information. Thus the information obtained on faction fighting is largely mediated through 'expert' academics. Spokespeople from the greater Durban area had to be interviewed on the campus. In some cases, people quite understandably refused to be videoed at all.

While no video can be an objective or definitive work on any subject, it becomes increasingly difficult to produce alternative viewpoints to that of the dominant powers in a country like South Africa. However, effective participatory filmmaking remains an ongoing challenge, for filmmakers who operate in South Africa, in its attempt to empower people who are at present disempowered.