
FOR A CRITIQUE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM FESTIVALS IN ITALY

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, in Italy and elsewhere, there has been a steady increase in the number of ethnographic film festivals in addition to the ones that we can in full right consider "classical": the *Festival dei Popoli* held in Florence, the *Cinema du Reel* in Paris, and the *Margaret Mead Film Festival* in New York. This phenomenon deserves to be observed with some attention for its possible implications on Visual Anthropology and on its development, and to check the role that these events play — or are meant to play — from the point of view of information and of diffusion of the so-called "ethnographic film".

This paper will focus mainly on the present situation in Italy, to avoid giving an exceedingly general and superficial report (but of course some general statement can also be done).

For what concerns Visual Anthropology, the case of Italy is anyhow quite peculiar: there is a certain delay in general, and in ethno-anthropological filmmaking in particular, in comparison to other countries even though, paradoxically, the origine of Visual Anthropology in Italy can be traced back to 1870—80 (Chiozzi, 1987a; 1988); on the other hand, in the field of "Ethnographic Film Festivals", Italy holds a historical record, as the *Festival dei Popoli* of Florence is the first international film festival dedicated to sociological and ethno-anthropological films (Chiozzi, 1987b). Finally it is in Italy, maybe more than elsewhere, that events connected to Visual Anthropology have proliferated in very recent years.

Last but not least, the analysis of the Italian situation will give us a chance to express some general ideas on the *function* of Ethnographic Film Festivals that it would be absurd to limit to the mere role of "showrooms" as it often seems to happen.

2. THE AUDIENCE OF THE "FESTIVAL DEI POPOLI"

When in 1959, in Florence, a small group of social science scholars and of film-lovers gave birth to the first "international festival of sociological and ethnographic film", named *Festival dei Popoli*, nobody I believe expected that initiative to grow to the levels attained in subsequent years. For some time the Festival was only a meeting point for specialists and scholars, but soon the audience began to

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grow to the surprising number of nearly 30.000 spectators in 6—7 days of screening, in the early 1970ies. Those were the years of the great social and political upheavals connected to the Vietnam war (it was not by chance that the peak was reached for the screening of the film *Introduction to the Enemy* by Jane Fonda and others, in 1974), and the Festival dei Popoli, in Italy, offered the only chance to see “rare” film documents. In the following years, and not only because of the changing tide on the socio-political plane, attendance sensibly diminished and the great audiences disappeared — but not for long. Since the late '70ies, infact, the tendency is again inverted and in the last 10 years the average audience of the Festival numbers about 10.000 spectators in 8—9 days of screening.

But the history of the Festival dei Popoli has already been told (Tasselli, 1982; Chiozzi, 1987b), and it is not our concern here. A more interesting task, in my opinion, is to examine the composition of the audience and its attitude towards specifically “ethnographic” films.

2.1. *The composition of the audience*

As statistics surveys have been conducted only in the last two editions of the Festival (1986 and 1987) a diacronic analysis is unfortunately impossible at present; all we can give is a synchronic picture, while any remark about the tendencies now at work could not go beyond hypothesis to be checked in the future.

The sample observed in the last two years concerns only the audience of the Festival itself, not including the other events that take place every year in connection with it (seminars, retrospectives, conferences, etc.) as an integral part of its programme even if not held in the same place. It has been observed anyhow that those audiences usually follow the films as well, as far as schedules allow it — that is mainly in the evenings. This type of audience — especially in the case of seminars and conferences — is quite specialized and made up of scholars, experts or people particularly interested in the specific issue, usually expressly invited by the organizers. All these people are not included in the sample used, so as not to invalidate the results of the research that was meant to draw the sociological profile of the general audience following the screenings for reasons not strictly connected with professional status.

The data concerning the average age and composition of the audience for 1986 and 1987 are indicated in the following chart:

	1986	1987
AVERAGE AGE (years)	33.3	30.5
STUDENTS	27 %	38 %
TEACHERS	19 %	15 %
EMPLOYEES	22 %	13.5 %
OTHERS	28 %	31.5 %
PENSIONERS	4 %	2 %

The most significant data is the increase in the number of *students* (including university as well as high school students), whose attendance grows by 40,75 %, as well as the sharp decrease in the per-

centage of *employees*. While this second data is difficult to interpret (and we'll have to wait until next survey to formulate any hypothesis), the explanation of the first one probably lays in the initiatives taken by the Festival in the last few years to establish a "privileged" relationship with the schools and the University of Florence. Paradoxically the festival dei Popoli, although a 30 year old institution in Florence, was familiar only to certain limited sectors of the population with a special interest in strictly "cinematographic" activities. The new course the organizers are now trying to follow has the aim of transforming the Festival dei Popoli in a permanent cultural institution whose activities are meant to go well beyond the annual appointment of the Festival itself. One of the key-points of this new course is exactly the offer of programmes for schools and university departments of humanities, using the visual materials collected in the film-archive until recently completely unexploited.

2.2. *The attitude of the audience towards ethno-anthropological films*
The "competition" and "information" sections of the Festival dei Popoli may include sociological, political, anthropological documentary films and, more generally, any cinematographic work that can be classified under the wide label of *social documentation* — the specific field of interest so defined by the articles of association of the Festival. This general label refers essentially to the *contents* the films must have to enter the Festival, while the typological distinction reflects mainly the specific chosen approach — in other words, is meaningful in this connection to remind the success of films (of unquestionable ethnographic interest however) like *Trobriand Cricket* by Gary Kildea.

Another element to consider is the need expressed by the audience of a commentary accompanying the images, especially of an anonymous voice-off "explaining" the subject filmed. It doesn't even seem to be considered sufficient a dry commentary, limited — as Heider suggests — to the explanation of the visual mysteries and to the setting of the filmed event in its cultural context; on the contrary audiences seem to prefer a redundant commentary (of the type that in the end adds little to the information given by the images), thus showing a certain *laziness* in the process of decodification and interpretation of the images or, in other words, a considerable degree of visual illiteracy.

In the end, the general impression — in spite of the encouraging data on the consistency of the audience — is certainly negative from the point of view of quality, and one might be tempted to accept the pessimistic conclusion that we are confronted with a largely *immature* audience. This is the reason why I believe it is important to think over the "meaning" of ethnographic film festivals — and not out of fear for their future development, but because I believe that such circumstances force us to reconsider (and redefine) their role.

3. ETHNO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL FILM FESTIVALS IN ITALY

Especially in the 80ies, regular meetings dedicated to ethnographic film and visual anthropology have increased in number: maybe they

can't always be called *festivals*, if we reserve this term for events addressed to an audience not confined only to specialists. However, I believe it is correct to include them in this review because they take place regularly and they are in principle open to anyone even if sometimes they are only attended by scholars and experts.

A comparison between the different experiences might give us some useful hint for our reflections.

3.1. Roma: *Materiali di Antropologia Visiva*

The Italian Association for Scientific Cinematography (AICS) has been promoting in recent years several initiatives, sometimes in cooperation with other institutions, in the field of visual anthropology. In 1985, with the cooperation of the National Museum of Folk Arts and Traditions (Rome), the first *Seminar* accompanied by screenings took place; an event meant to become a regular appointment, every two years, for university students and experts. It has a monographic structure and a lot of space is reserved to theoretic and methodological debate.

3.2. Nuoro: *Rassegna Internazionale di Documentari Cinematografici e televisivi*

A strictly monographic event regularly taking place every two years promoted by the Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico of Sardinia, with the cooperation of AICS and of a Scientific Committee composed by representatives of Italian (the Festival dei Popoli and the Italian Association for Audio-Visual Anthropology) and foreign Institutions (I.W.F. of Göttingen, BBC and others). The subject of the first edition (1982) was *The Shepherd and its Image*, the second one (1984) was dedicated to *The World Upturned, or the Controlled Transgression*, the third (1986) to *Marriage: Wedding Rituals in Traditional Societies*. The theme chosen for 1988 is *Women and Work in Traditional Societies*. Screenings are accompanied by seminars on the subject chosen for the year and on the methodology of audio-visual documentation.

3.3. Palermo: *Settimana Mediterranea del Film Antropologico*

An annual event since 1984, is promoted by the Laboratorio Antropologico of Palermo University. It is a review of ethno-anthropological films produced in the Mediterranean area often including, however, other productions. For this reason it doesn't have yet a very specific "identity".

3.4. Orbetello: *Agrifilmfestival*

Its specific subject is agriculture, and since 1985 it includes an ethno-anthropological section organized by the Department of Anthropology of the University of Siena. Although the peasant world is the constant theme, there is a tendency to propose every year a monographic selection of documentaries accompanied by a seminar.

3.5. Sud Tirol: *Antropologia visuale della regione alpina*

A retrospective film festival that will take place every two years. The first edition was held in Bolzano in 1987. It is the youngest but

most promising festival because of as well defined "geographical" choice which will allow a comparison between different approaches to visual-anthropological documentation and research in the same area.

3.6. *Guardia Sanframondi: Incontri Cinematografici Internazionali con le Tradizioni Popolari*

A yearly event since 1987, it includes documentary as well as fiction films dealing with folk traditions.

4. SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

If we want to classify the various events with reference to their audiences, we must divide them in two groups: the ones explicitly addressed to a wide non-specialized audience with the declared, or undeclared, intent of spreading the knowledge of ethnographic film, and those conceived on the contrary as "study seminars" for scholars and filmmakers, with the occasional participation of small numbers of interested people, like university students.

In the first case the choice of visual materials might be influenced by the need to offer products of a good formal level (i. e. in some way "spectacular"). In the second, at least in theory, it should be easier to present research materials. But another general point is to consider: the risk of these numerous events overlapping or repeating one another. This is certainly a problem and I believe the only solution would be to stress the "specialized" character of some of them. The brief review given under point 3. reveals that there is actually a tendency to characterize some events by limiting their geographical and/or cultural field of interest (Mediterranean area in Palermo, Alpine region in Sud Tirol), or by selecting a monographic theme (Nuoro and Orbetello); but in some cases, maybe for lack of organization or of scientific awareness, this seems to remain only an intention.

We must consider here, however, the consequences this process of specialization (that from several points of view we are to wish always more intense) might have on the attitude of the audiences. A monographic film festival has many advantages if it is meant to support a discussion between experts, but it often turns out to be a disaster from the point of view of audience attendance.

This *ambiguous* character of ethnographic film festivals demands some reflection on their role, their functions and their perspectives.

5. ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS AND THEIR AUDIENCE: WHAT TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP?

The various Italian festivals were mostly born to fulfil needs of "scientific communication", in the sense that the first official motive is to offer filmmakers and anthropologists chances to meet and exchange ideas. The only exception is maybe the Guardia Sanframondi festival who, while other festivals are usually promoted by

scientific institutions, is organized directly by the Municipality "within a wider programme of cultural events" in direct connection with local folk traditions, and is therefore addressed in the first place to the local population, even if higher ambitions are not altogether dismissed.

Only in a few cases a wider audience is involved, and this poses a question that we must have the courage to ask: does the "little tribe" of visual anthropologists, already frequently meeting during international festivals — where it often happens to see the same things really need all these additional occasions to exchange ideas? I doubt it. But most of all I want to stress the fact that this alters the concept of festival itself, that must be understood as an occasion to socialize particular experiences. A visual document, in anthropology, has three main functions that we can indicate with the terms *preservation, research, communication* (Chiozzi, 1984). An "ethnographic film festival" has a meaning only if it is aimed, *in the first place*, at developing communication, which doesn't mean only to promote meetings of experts and scholars; nor on the other hand would a festival be useful conceived just as a "show-window", a ritualized event leaving almost no trace once the curtain is drawn. The focus of our attention must be the *relationship with the audience*, keeping in mind the afore-mentioned considerations (2.1 and 2.2) about the relative "immaturity" of the audience — a fact that will put out the enthusiasm that might be lit by the *quantitative* success scored by some festivals.

5.1. *The Festival dei Popoli: from "seasonal ritual" to permanent institution*

It is always difficult to generalize, and even more so in this context where we are faced with a problem so complex that even its terms are difficult to define. Therefore I don't intend to give here any answer of universal value; I shall only present an experience that deserves some reflection and discussion, also to compare it possibly with other ideas and experiences.

For several years the organizers of the Festival dei Popoli have discussed the destiny and the future possibilities of the Festival, the role it was meant to have both as an international event (therefore in relationship to the documentary filmmaking and academic circles) and as a cultural institutions part of a specific context, the city of Florence (therefore in relationship to other Florentine institutions and to its audience). Their doubts were caused by the awareness that something "was not working": it seemed meaningless to go on proposing a Festival that was only a "seasonal ritual" — wether a "collective rejoicing" or a "initiatc ritual". The passive attitude of the audience and a decrease of interest shown by specialists made clear that a vicious circle was about to be entered risking to transform the Festival in an isolated event, an end to itself, where the main concern would in the end have become the search of a *scoop* of some sort — like the first screening of particularly attractive works which would momentarily raise a great audience determining a positive reaction of the press, thus giving some self-satisfaction to the organizers and to some filmmakers.

Was there any purpose in continuing along that line? or should the Festival have tried to become something different? and if that was the point, how was it going to change?

The Festival was born with definite and declared cultural and scientific ambitions, not excluding the will to work also for an effective popularization of socio-anthropological knowledge. But, as mentioned, those ambitions were gradually being forgotten for an inevitable process of wearing out caused by the ritual repetitive character of the traditional concept of *festival*. The question thus became more radical: which function should the festival have today in relationship to its audience, or better, to its two different types of audience? The solution was not easy to find, because it seemed clear that the question could be answered only by "overturning" the idea of festival itself.

In the first place the question of choosing between a lay or an expert audience is no longer posed: the two are no longer considered opposed and it has been decided that the Festival must be addressed to both, through a programme at two different, but complementary, levels. But, especially, a choice of quality has been made transforming the Festival in a *permanent institution*, that is active all year round and not only at festival-time.

How was this done? In various different ways:

a) the development of the film and video archive

A greater number of documentaries has been acquired and their use has been rationalized, especially by putting them at the disposal of institutions like universities, secondary schools, ethnographic museums, etc.;

b) retrospectives and monographic sections

In the course of the year different initiatives are promoted, and not only in the city of Florence. An example might be the project on "Cinema and History" still in course at present and meant to become an annual event, including the screening of documentary and fiction films as well seminars organized by an International Scientific Committee. In addition the Festival organizes abroad retrospectives on Italian social-documentary films;

c) publications

the Festival has always promoted a certain degree of publishing activity, that is now being strengthened by regular publishing the "proceedings" of the most important conferences organized, or by promoting other publications in the field of the Festival's competence (mainly visual anthropology, cinema and television);

d) research projects

the Festival promotes also research activities, directly or in cooperation with other institutions. At present, research work is being done through a project on urban anthropology and the possible applications of audio-visual techniques in this particular field;

e) production

the Festival is taking the first steps also in the field of production, but its activity is at present limited to television programmes (in cooperation with the most important Italian commercial TV network).

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Ö KRITIKI FESTIVALOV ETNOGRAFSKEGA FILMA V ITALIJI

V zadnjih letih se je v Italiji in tudi drugod močno povečalo število festivalov etnografskega filma, ob tistih, ki so že »klasični« (Festival dei Popoli, Cinéma du Réel, Margaret Mead Film Festival). Ta pojav zasluži, da ga pozorno obravnavamo v povezavi z možnimi vplivi na razvoj vizualne antropologije in da preverimo vlogo tega pojava pri razširjanju t. i. etnografskega filma.

Članek se nanaša v glavnem na situacijo v Italiji, ne da bi stvari posploševali, v kolikor se posplošitve ne bodo vsiljevale same od sebe.

Kar zadeva vizualno antropologijo, je italijanski primer nekoliko nenavaden: etno-antropološko filmanje na splošno je tukaj v določenem zaostanku v primerjavi z drugimi deželami, čeprav, paradoksalno, lahko začetek vizualne antropologije v Italiji sledimo tja v leta 1870—80. Po drugi strani drži Italija zgodovinski rekord tudi na področju festivalov etnografskega filma. Festival dei Popoli v Firencah je namreč prvi mednarodni festival posvečen sociološkemu in etno-antropološkemu filmu. In končno, prav v Italiji se je v zadnjih letih, bolj kot drugje, vizualna antropologija naenkrat močno razcvetela.

Zato nam analiza italijanskega primera daje možnost očrtati nekaj splošnih idej o funkciji festivalov etnografskega filma, ne samo o njihovi vlogi nekakšnih filmskih izložb.

V 80 letih je število festivalov v Italiji naraslo na 6 tematskih festivalov mednarodnega značaja, ob že znanem Festivalu dei Popoli. Te festivale delimo v dve skupini. V prvi so tisti, ki so namenjeni široki, nespecializirani publiki, v drugi pa tisti, ki so bolj študijske narave. V prvi skupini se pojavlja težnja po spektakularnosti, v drugi pa je pozornost usmerjena v prikazovanje raziskovalnega gradiva. Problem je, da se na vseh teh »festivalih« srečujejo vedno isti ljudje.

Vizualni dokument v antropologiji ima tri glavne funkcije: arhiviranje, raziskovanje in komunikacija. Festival etnografskih filmov ima smisel, če je usmerjen v komunikacijo, v iskanje stika med antropologijo in publiko.

To vlogo je v Italiji najbolj izpopolnil Festival dei Popoli, ki se počasi spreminja v stalno ustanovo, aktivno celo leto. Ob komunikacijski vlogi razvija še naslednje usmeritve: filmski in video arhiv, retrospektivno in monografsko sekcijo, publiciranje, raziskovanje in proizvodnjo.