

# Practices of Intercultural Documentary Making



Dr. Hudson Moura  
Saint Joseph's University  
April 10, 2013

---

# AGENDA

## 1. Introductions

- What brought me to documentary

## 2. Study Cases:

1. *An Hungarian Passport* (FRA, 2001) Sandra Kogut
2. *Stone Time Touch* (CAN, 2007) Gariné Torossian
3. *Letters to Angola* (BRA, 2012) Coraci Ruiz and Julio Matos
4. *Raul Gatica* (CAN, 2006) Adina Moore
5. *Returning Home* (CAN/BEL, 2009) Sanja Zivkovic

## 3. Tips



- Documentary function
  - Social Representation
  - Personal Point of View
- What inspires a documentary
  - What you have seen/done/experimented/lived
- **The importance to choose a subject that you feel interested**
  - **Personal Commitment and Passion**

*“Documentary is a creative treatment of actuality”*

- John Grierson

# Why to make a documentary?

---

# What are your goals?

- a) Who, What, When, Why, Where and how?
- b) What opinions about the world are you going to show in your film by following your protagonist?
- c) What is the main “statement” that you want to emerge out of the film’s conflicts/discussions?
- d) What is the concept for your documentary?
- e) Why do you want to make it?
- f) Why should an audience want to watch it?

Looking for the ideas:

- Talk to people, be curious
- Read magazines, the web, news, TV, radio
- There is also documentary potential in non-real stories (fictional or newsworthy)
- Watch and Search your doc Style



- General themes or vague ideas are not enough. You must research enough to be able to put together a good story.
- Learn everything you can about your documentary subject. Sometimes the story lines are obvious, sometimes not. Do a lot of digging and follow leads. This is where you put on your reporter hat.
- Selecting your characters:
  - strong, charismatic, extraordinary
  - Willing to give access, true access
- The gems of your story are sometimes buried deep out of sight.
- **Do not manipulate the story to make it fit. It always shows.**

# **Research, Research, Research**

---

# Doc Screenwriting

## WORKING HYPOTHESIS AND INTERPRETATION

- a) Write a hypothesis statement incorporating this wording...
- b) In life I believe that...
- c) My film will show this in action by exploring (situation)...
- d) The main conflict is between...
- e) Ultimately, I want the audience to feel: and to understand that...

## WRITE A CONCISE PARAGRAPH ABOUT:

- a) Your film's subject (person, group, environment, social issue, etc.)
  - b) The necessary background information the audience must have to understand and to be interested in the enclosed world you intend to present. Be sure to show how this information will emerge.
  - c) Write a brief paragraph for each intended sequence that shows an activity. (A sequence is usually delineated by being in one location, one chunk of time, or an assembly of materials to show one topic).
  - d) Write a brief paragraph about each of your main characters.
-



# Representing others and ethics

What responsibility do filmmakers have for the effect of their acts on the lives of those filmed?

- As documentarians, we deal with real people that are going to expose their lives publicly, to reveal their intimates thoughts, ideas, convictions, stories on a big screen.
  - And, your film can or will in certain aspects affect their lives. You need let them comfortable, to go to places they feel safe and have a real connection to film's subject.
  - “People are treated as *social actors*: they continue to conduct their lives more or less as they would have done without the presence of a camera. They remain cultural players rather than theatrical performers.”
  - “Self-consciousness -- the act of filmmaking alters the reality it sets out to represent.”
-



- Ethics becomes a measure of the ways in which negotiations about the nature of the **relationship between filmmaker and subject** have consequences for subjects and viewers alike:
  - When they don't know the people (but a certain issue of problem) run the risk of exploit them
  - When they prefer to observe without intervene run the risk of altering behavior or events
  - When are familiar with the people face the challenge of losing their own perspective and 'critique' distance
- Copyright issues!...
  - Images, sound and music





# Trustful Relationship

- Informed consent – they must inform the people about the “dangerous side-effects”
  - “Of what consequences or risks filmmakers should inform their subjects?”
  - “To what extent can the filmmaker honestly reveal his or her intentions or foretell the actual effects of a film?”
- You need to create a **trustful relationship** with your characters, to make them believe in your intentions and always respect their limitations and their words.



# On-Camera Interviews

For each interview, list:  
Name, role in life, metaphoric role in film's dramatic structure;  
Main elements your interview will seek to establish.



Albert and David Maysles

- Motivated (following the character's movement) or unmotivated (fixed) Camera
- Sit down or on-the-fly (problems with on-the-fly: sound and mic, camera focus, handing the camera, circumstances, etc)
- Should I pre-interview? Learn as much as possible about your subject before your interview.
- Are you going to be on camera?
- Should I pay for interviews?



# Interviewee

- Listen carefully what they are saying in order to interact with them and to direct the interview through the right path getting the best you can to tell their story. Also, it is important not to interrupt them, otherwise your voice will overlap their voice and it will be difficult to do the editing work.
- Always have at least one camera all the time on your character without moving to other parts of the “set”. You can lose an important shot (emotional, anger, happiness) missing the characters’ expressions and body reactions.
- Ask them to repeat part of the question, if this is appropriate to your style and you don’t want to have your voice as interviewer in edited version.
- Never underestimated the importance of the sound → Bad image is acceptable and can be replaced in the editing by the B-Roll, but a poor sound can compromise the entire project. The audience needs to understand the interviewees’ words.

# Montage

- Visualize your documentary – what is the main narrative force?
- Transcribe the interviews and start to putting together your puzzle—structure your film accordingly.



# Storytelling

Style and Filming Strategy → personal/subjective point of view, or neutral 3rd person objective, interaction with the characters.

- Free Flow Documentaries: essay, historical, biographical
- Story driven docs, character driven docs, POV docs, process docs
- Portrait Docs
- Docs with multiple story lines and combination of genres

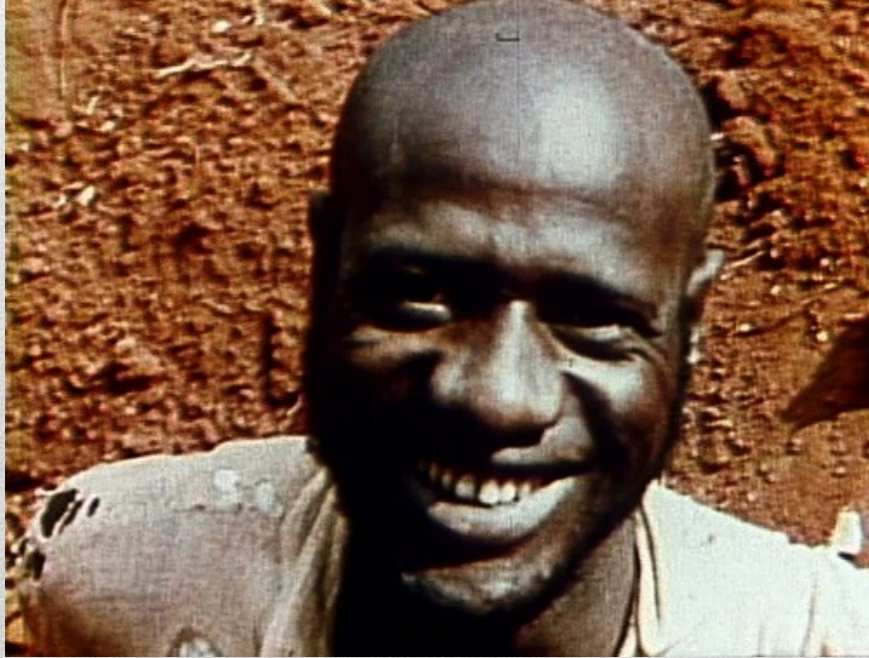
Other types of documentary:

- Cinéma Vérité
- Fly on the wall
- Objectivity in documentary
- Ethnographic
- **Intercultural**

# Ethnography Evidence

- Ethnography concerned with the documentation (film, photo, writing, music or sound) - it implies a regime of veracity. (Catherine Russell, p 10)
- Ethnographic film theory and criticism discuss issues of objectivity, subjectivity, realism, narrative structure, ethical questions of representation.
- Being linked to social science imply a commitment to objectivity, and the role of film is principally to provide empirical evidence.





This will not be a cinema of truth but the truth of cinema. This principle of Cinéma Verité begins to be clearly in Rouch's ethnographic film, *Mad Masters*, when the characters in the ritual, possessed, drunk, foaming and in trances, are first shown in their daily reality where they are waiters, navies and laborers, as they become again after the ceremony. What they were before... (Gilles Deleuze, *Time-Image*, p. 146)



TREICHVILLE



In *Moi un Noir* directed by Jean Rouch in 1958, there are real characters in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, who are shown through the roles of their story-telling, “Edward G. Robinson” the dockworker, “Dorothy Lamour” the little prostitute, and “Eddie Constantine, aka Lemmy Caution, U.S. Federal Agent” the unemployed man—fantasy identities that allow them a ludic escape from the limits imposed by their economic conditions.

Jean-Luc Godard's early enthusiasm for *Moi, un Noir* centres on Rouch's ability to transform his collaborators into characters who played out their lives—both real and idealized—in front of the camera.



- “The new ethnographic approaches are historically grounded and politically aware, recognizing the frequent colonial or neo-colonial underpinnings of the relationship between anthropologists and anthropological subject, recognizing the agency of the anthropological subject and their right as well as their ability to enter into a discourse about the construction of their lives.” (Marcus Banks, Visual Anthropology)





“I do not intent to speak about, just speak nearby,”  
Trinh T. Minh-Ha – *Reassemblage* (1982)



● Trinh T. Minh-Ha films “use both poetic and aggressive strategies to compel the viewer to consider the destructive effects of believing that one can know another culture or another time through visual information alone. [...] Do not believe what you see, but think of the image as a box whose contents you must infer.” Laura Marks, 2000, p. 134



- A reflection on filming in rural Senegal and a critique of the anthropological I/eye. The film "denotes something more than an exceptional spirit of observation; let's say by all means a kind of amorous enthrallment" -- Alberto Moravia, L'Espresso
- "With uncanny eloquence, Reassemblage distills sounds and images of Senegalese villagers and their surroundings to reconsider the premises of ethnographic filmmaking. By disjunctive editing and a probing narration, this 'documentary' strikingly counterpoints the authoritative stance of the National Geographic approach." -- Laura Thielen
- "Superbly crafted and visually exquisite... In its form and content, it critiques both western science and documentary traditions" -- Pat Aufderheide, The Village Voice
- "sweetly weird... in questioning all the presumption of ethnographic filmmaking" -- Jim Hoberman, The Village Voice
- "captures a glimpse of beauty and death without allowing in the scenic exoticism so fatal to the National Geographic format" -- Kathleen Hulser, The Independent
- "a work (that) carries a critique of its own pronouncements and challenges any investment in pompous profundities" -- Barbara Kruger, Art Forum
- <http://trinhminh-ha.com>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cc5G2-rTKis>

# Anthropological I/Eye

---





# Defining Intercultural Strategies



More and more artists and theorists are turning to **film and video** as a means of addressing social questions, from gay and lesbian identities, to diasporic politics, cultural and family memory, and histories of oppression, resistance, and criminal justice systems. We need to understand how filmmakers have experimented with the “otherness” of reality, and how From Flaherty to Minh-ha, filmmakers have struggled to find a means of representing “culture” that is in some way appropriate to the intercultural experience.



# *An Hungarian Passport* (2001) Sandra Kogut



Speaking over the telephone with the Hungarian consulate, the Brazilian filmmaker Sandra Kogut asks:

“Can someone who has a Hungarian grandfather obtain a Hungarian passport?”

The bureaucrat on the other end of the line is confused, “Yes...it’s possible...but why do you want a Hungarian passport?”

The filmmaker asks for the list of necessary documents, but the employee still doesn’t understand why she would want to become Hungarian. The administrative process – obtaining a passport – becomes the conducting thread of the film.

On the way, she explores a painful family history of forced emigration and the pervasive effects of racism. At the same time, she confronts some essential questions: What is nationality? What is a passport for? What should we do with our heritage? How do we construct our history and our own identity?



## ***Why intercultural cinema?***

Intercultural or exile cinema presents a great variety of possible ways to comprehend, know, and represent the world through the experience of displacement. In this way, filmmakers create original approaches to cinematographic resources and language, such as frame, montage, interactions between audio and video, polyphony of voices, music and accents.

- “Intercultural cinema is characterized by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West.” (Laura U. Marks)
-





## ***Stone Time Touch* (CAN, 2007)**

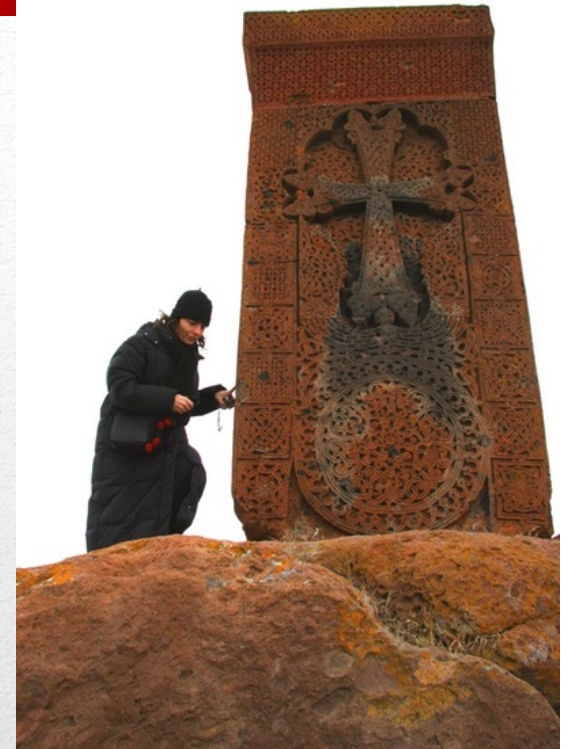
### **Gariné Torossian**

*“It was only through film that I could get to the core of these [cultural identity] questions.”*

- In her first feature film, Torossian make a journey to Armenia accompanied by Atom Egoyan’s wife and *fetish actress*, Arsinée Khanjian.
  - This film explores Torossian’s cultural origins from a personal perspective and with an organic interaction with the camera. She retraces her origins and that of her ancestors in a deep search for their place and culture through layered interactions with the image. She has defined her work as a “return” voyage to her ancestors’ land.
-



The title of the film *Stone Time Touch* comes from one Khanjian's speeches in the film. If *stone* refers to the rocky mountains of Armenian landscape as well as the ruins of the historical sites (Yerevan is one of the most ancient cities in the world), time refers to this juxtaposition of images of the present and the past. Through images from historical archives, she assembles the actual physical experience along with the imaginative one. In one way or another, the film's images have been "touched" by superimpositions, reframing, out-of-focus or dislocating their original pace.





# *Letters to Angola* (BRA, 2012)

## Coraci Ruiz and Julio Matos

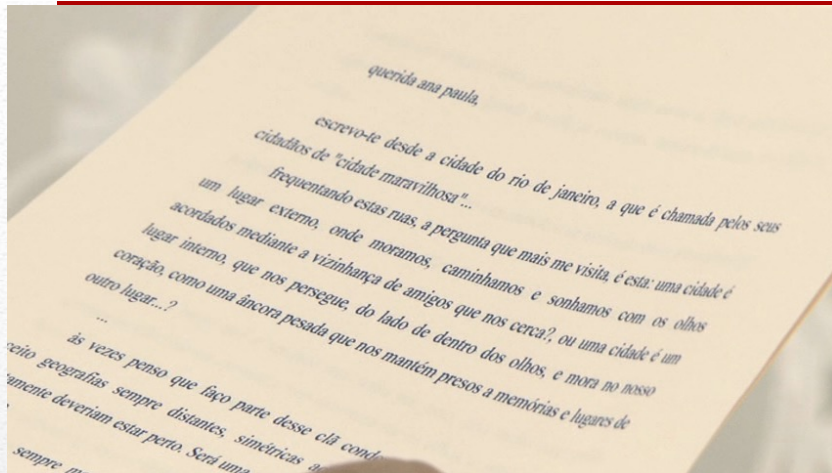


Brazil and Angola while on either side of the Atlantic Ocean have the same language, a common colonial past and many shared stories. In this film, correspondence is exchanged between these two places - some people are longtime friends, others have never met. Their stories intertwine and tell about migration, nostalgia, belonging, war, prejudice, exile and distance. The search for identity and flow of memory are driven by the line of affection that binds the seven pairs of speakers presented in this documentary, people whose life stories are traced between Brazil, Angola and Portugal.









# Video Letters

Dear Ana Paula,

I am writing to you from the city of Rio de Janeiro, the Marvelous City, as referred to by the locals. Walking these streets, the question I ask myself most is this: is a city an external place, where we live, walk and dream with our eyes open through the neighborhood of friends around us, or is a city an internal place, that haunts us from inside and lives in our hearts like a heavy anchor keeping us fixated on memories and places from another place?





Sometimes I think I'm part of this clan that is sentenced to feel nostalgia. I always look for and accept distant lands, similar to the places and people who should supposedly be close by. Is it a surrender to distance that causes this nostalgia? Moreover, nostalgia is also an illusion where we make what we want to imagine as far away fit, as desirable, because it's out of reach. [...] I like to tell these stories of Luanda, real or invented. Just to tell these stories. In the early morning, even closer, closer, even further away, closer. Luanda itself, in our hearts.

A little kiss for you, Ondjaki





For Ondjaki,

This video letter you sent is interesting, because it has sound and motion, although it is in the words and through the words that I am able to recognize you. [...] The important thing is the margin, and the way we control our desire to be in a place with our back turned to the north while peeking to the south, writing letters to Angola and waiting for answers. Stay well and send updates, poems, news, filmed stories, e-mails, letters with stamps, on scented paper. I will read everything as if I were living once again in this life of ours, sharing our affections in the craziest parts of this entire world.

With all the tenderness of a mother, all my best, Paula Tavares





Coraci Ruiz was born in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1978. She graduated with a major in Dance at Unicamp and received a Master of Arts from the same university, with a research on documentary filmmaking. The short film *Another City* (2009), conducted as part of her thesis, was awarded an Honorable Mention in the 14th International Ethnographic Film Festival and participated in several festivals, including the 33rd. International Film Festival of São Paulo and the 5rd. Latin-American Film Festival of São Paulo.



Julio Matos was born in Campinas, Brazil, in 1978. He graduated with a major in sociology at Unicamp. He has worked as a director assistant and production manager on feature films. He is a film producer and documentary director.

Together they held the workshop "Realización the documentary" at La Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV de San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, in 2005, and directed several short films: among them, *Saudade*, *Video Letters to Cuba* (2005) awarded with Best Independent Brazilian Documentary in the 14th. Gramado Cine Video, and has been shown in festivals in Brazil and abroad; *Recreated Routes* (2004), awarded Best Social Video, Best Independent Video Brazilian by Jury and Audience in 13th. Gramado Cine Video; *Black Eyes: Sharing Images* (2003), which won the Special Jury Prize in the 4th. Catherine Documentary Film Festival.



# Subtitles



“Increasingly, accented films are using the film’s frame as a writing tablet on which appear multiple texts in original languages and in translation in the form of titles, subtitles, intertitles, or block of texts” (Hamid Naficy)

With subtitles, people “began to achieve some of the immediacy, individuality, and complexity of people in fiction films. [...] It paid attention to their intellectual life [...] and provided a new pathway to their thoughts and feelings.” (David McDougall)



# Dubbing



Dubbing decreases the sense of 'otherness' and is an excellent example of domestication (Szarkowska).

Dubbing can also be perceived as "an assertion of the supremacy of the national language and its unchallenged political, economic and cultural power within the nation's boundaries" (Danan).




- *Raúl Gatica* was produced by Adina Moore for the course *Exile Cinema*. In this documentary on exile, by its minimalist and abstract form, its use of the interpreter instead of subtitles, and the relevance of its political statement, reveals the anguish of immigrants and emphasizes the issue of self-discourse and translation.

## ***Raúl Gatica* by Adina Moore**

---





*Returning Home* was produced by Sanja Zivkovic as final assignment for the course *Screen Culture*. Sanja returned to Belgrade, Serbia, 15 years after fleeing war and immigrating to Canada. “After fifteen years of living in Canada, I finally return to the apartment where I grew up in Belgrade, Serbia”. In this *first-person* documentary, Sanja Zivkovic evokes the themes of mediatised memory and the intermediation of the subtitles.

## ***Returning Home*** **by Sanja Zivkovic**

---





**Tips**

---