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## “DEVICE-ORG”: IMAGE-WORK OF TIME IN THE MOVING IMAGE THE FILM AS “INTERMEDIAL ETHOS” IN AUDIOVISUAL RESEARCH THE CASE STUDY

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**Abstract:** The present work explores the intersection between visual anthropology and the artistic practices of the moving image, challenging the traditional perception of the “anthropologist-researcher” as a passive process with images. The research focuses on the concept of “intermedial ethos”, where audiovisual artistic practice and scientific and social research mutually enrich each other. Reference is made to the crisis of representation in anthropology in the 80s and the poetic dimension of ethnography is addressed. The “Org Device” project is presented as a case study that explores the limits of representation and proposes new forms of thinking and research. The work is situated at the confluence of theory and practice, highlighting the crucial role of the moving image in the humanities and social sciences.

“...at the root of every device is located a desire for human goodness, very human, and both the appropriation and the subjectivation of that desire are housed within a separate sphere, which constitutes the specific power of the device.”

**Giorgio Agamben**

“...I did not want to offer truth, but veracity, examples and not reasoning, motives and not causes, fragments and not systems.”

**Enrique Vila-Matas**

## INTRODUCTION

The academic paradigm that guides our work as image workers of the University of the Arts (Ecuador) and Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (Ecuador), is assigned to what is categorized as the “teacher-researcher”. As academics in visualities and Latin American

studies, we align ourselves towards the profile of the “teacher-researcher”. Although sometimes seen as passive theorists, our work in visual anthropology and communication reinforces the relevance of cultural and visual studies, challenging this perceived passivity.

One of our purposes in the teaching role is to overcome the boundaries between academia and practice, striving to promote the concept of an “intermedial ethos”<sup>1</sup>(Elhaik, 2016). This ethos entails an incessant interaction between audiovisual artistic practice and contextualized scientific and social research, in an attempt to enrich and acquire knowledge of both areas.

In the 1980s, anthropology went through a so-called crisis of representation. Period of self-inquiry and reevaluation of the concepts, practices and representations that constitute the discipline to this day. Part of this research is a faithful heir to this crisis, especially the reflection on the poetic dimension in ethnography, as presented in “Writing Culture” by James Clifford and George Marcus. The authors, among many observations, directions and criticisms, fuse theory and practice by uniting moving images with visual anthropology to review representation and methodology. The crisis questioned anthropological authenticity, prompting the discipline to redefine itself and “true fictions” to question truth versus its representation. Here, art and cinema collaborate with anthropology, intertwining research with visual dynamism. with the moving image.

Our study highlights the poetry inherent in ethnography and defines it as a hybrid textual genre, exemplified in “Org Device.”

1. “...an anthropology that postulates an “intermedial ethos” that, therefore, promotes a reconceptualization of research processes based on participant observation, and of fieldwork conceived as “curatorial designs” (Elhaik and Marcus 2012; Elhaik 2016). Once the centrality of the anthropos as an object of study is displaced, the ethnographic project is equally removed from the naive tropes of the “encounter” toward the confrontational nature of stories, perspectives, and contexts of fieldwork placement (Fabian 1996).” (Elhaik, *Antipod. Rev. Antropol. Arqueol.* No. 33 · Bogotá, October-December 2018 · ISSN 1900-5407 · e-ISSN 2011-4273 · pp. 3-11.

<https://doi.org/10.7440/antipoda33.2018.01>

This project challenges the traditional limits of representation and immerses itself in the creative reconfiguration of images and sounds, inspired by Soviet montage theory that prioritizes conflict as a creative engine. We thus opted for an original and fundamental approach to editing, moving away from conventional visual narratives.

## **VISUAL REPRESENTATION: THE FILM AS “INTERMEDIAL ETHOS”**

The work of art, in its various manifestations, becomes an “assemblage work”, a process of ethnographic representation that condenses multiple forms of practices and processes. In this context, film, the programmed design of an image, and curatorial practice and design are examples of such “assemblage works,” which encapsulate the ethnographic process in artistic creation. At this intersection of disciplines and practices, a reflection on culture emerges not as a scientific object, but as a vision produced historically and in constant dispute. This approach proposes a reevaluation of fieldwork and methodology as tools that generate theoretical questions and, at the same time, function as inscriptions that surround and construct the “intermedial ethos.”

In 1986, George E. Marcus and James Clifford published “Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.” This text led us to think, from the debates on the crisis of representation, to ethnography and field work as a theoretical locus that was explained, from methodological practice, in the exercise of research, management and administration of its data, and therefore its representation. Ethnography presents itself as a broad and abstract field that, despite everything, will require representation, method and construction.

Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of “something

made or fashioned,” the main burden of the word’s Latin root, *ingere*. But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real. (*Ingere*, in some of its uses, implied a degree of falsehood.) Interpretive social scientists have recently come to view good ethnographies as “true fictions,” but usually at the cost of weakening the oxymoron, reducing it to the banal claim that all truths are constructed” (Clifford, 1984, p. 6).

This “something made” to which Clifford refers has opened countless edges in the field of visual ethnography, finding in the visual arts and anthropology two common and consistent areas for collaboration. This statement places us, as research, in the context of the creation and design of the same project. How can we dialogue with the moving image if not with another moving image? However, beyond the considerations in this regard, the truth is that we will think about the moving image from the order of ethos to ethnos.

“The epistemology this implies cannot be reconciled with a notion of cumulative scientific progress, and the partiality at stake is stronger than the normal scientific dictates that we study problems piecemeal, that we must not overgeneralize, that the best picture is built up by an accretion of rigorous evidence. Cultures are not scientific “objects” (assuming such things exist, even in the natural sciences). Culture, and our views of “it,” are historically produced, and are actively contested. There is no whole picture that can be “filled in,” since the perception and filling of a gap leads to the awareness of other gaps” (Clifford, 1984, p. 18).

A film is, in this sense, the progressive representation of that ethnography. That “intermedial ethos” to which Elhaik was referring seeks to investigate a moving image such as the experimental film “ORG” (1968-1979) by the Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri. Our objective is to position ourselves from the production of another moving

image that confronts the same film that we are investigating, in an open dialogue of representation.

Thus, “Device Org” was born.

## **“DEVICE ORG”: METHOD, REPRESENTATION**

Considering the film as an “intermedial ethos” of an ethnographic nature, as a form of research, registration and inscription, in relation to a film investigation, considerations and definitions did not take long to emerge.

On the one hand, we want to reiterate that, today, in the year 2023, the postulates of “Writing Culture” continue to remain valid. This inheritance from James Clifford & George Marcus advocated a “poetic dimension of ethnography” that did not necessarily require facts (or data) that suppose the free exercise of the poetic. Ethnography, in this sense, became, according to Clifford, a “hybrid textual activity.” This “hybrid textual activity” finds in “Org Device” a kind of representation (intermedial ethos) to explore.

recognize the poetic dimensions of ethnography does not require that one give up facts and accurate accounting for the supposed free play of poetry. “Poetry” is not limited to romantic or modernist subjectivism: it can be historical, precise, objective. And of course, it is just as conventionally and institutionally determined as “prose.” Ethnography is hybrid textual activity: it traverses genres and disciplines. (Clifford, 26).

Another fundamental text from which this research draws heritage lies in the peculiar co-edition, once again, of George E. Marcus, together with Fred R. Myers: “The

Traffic in Art and Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology” (1995), a series of essays that demonstrate the constant flow of work and exchange between disciplines such as art and anthropology, as well as the scope of the representations of the disciplines in question. Of course, the scope of representation that had been inherited from the Writing Culture debates turned the appearance of “The Traffic” into a place of dialogue, in which revisionist practices and criticism of the art world found their locus and space. research. Particularly, for this research, I will work with two essays from said text: “The Traffic in Art and Culture: An Introduction” (George E. Marcus, Fred R. Myers) and “The Artist as Ethnographer?” (Hal Foster).

One of the greatest contributions of Marcus and Myers in this text has been to materialize (in an editorial record) something of what we could call the “anthropological turn” of art; a shift that, today, is observed with various nuances in its specific practices and theories, from approaches to extremely diverse places of enunciation and creation. The fact of dedicating themselves to the exercise of what they call “ARTWRITING” deserves to be highlighted.<sup>2</sup>as an active space for the creation of meanings and, therefore, creation. Those “verbal images” that Marcus highlights in the midst of the flows of creation in the art world. In this case, this research will seek to establish the use of these “verbal images” both for the production of critical texts of a literary, graphic-editorial and audiovisual nature. Thus, the purpose of the film “Org Device” as a research tool is argued as “verbal images” of utmost importance when thinking about the artwriting of this research. Artwriting as a

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2. “ Art writing—a term coined by Carrier (1987) to discuss a certain range of modern art criticism- is a useful means of representing a complex field of discursive practices that constitute the modern art world. This field includes not only the writing of art critics and scholars various sorts (art historians, curators, literary critics) but also of artists about their own work, and occasionally of collectors and others. As Myers recorded in an interview with a practicing artist “We all need a good scholar to write about our work-art and words, that’s what you need.” This sense of the importance of context has been reflexively absorbed within the work of art producers themselves.(...) the verbal images of contemporary artists who participate in artwriting are often much stronger than the material forms they create.” (Marcus and Myers, 1995, p. 27)

visual ethnographic tool. A film as artwriting?

Between the intermedial ethos of a film, grounded in hybrid textual activity, and its “verbal images” as a writing device (artwriting), I find resonance. However, it is crucial to highlight the final emphasis that the future analysis of practices in ethnographic writing and criticism attributes to: appropriation, the concept of border and circulation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this places me, once again, in the fact that the use, creation and study of the same piece (research film) in relation to the work to be investigated (study film) is a path to follow.

In his text, “What is the contemporary anthropology?” Tarek Elhaik recounts contexts in which the production of research schemes was conditioned.

On the one hand, there are those who cultivate an anti-pathetic relationship between art-historians, artists, curators and anthropologists, and who have made it more or less clear they do not desire the ethnographer and the artist to belong to the same sphere of existence. It is safe to say that Foster’s essay has (wittingly and inadvertently) generated and contributed to the expansion of this territorialized version of the ethnographic turn. On the other hand, there are those who would agree that contemporary anthropology and contemporary art worlds ought to remain distinct disciplinary fields. But the latter, to be sure, make exception for periodic overlaps only when those concerned pay strict attention to the ‘sensory’ convergences in their respective modes of deploying the experiential and methodological registers of ethnography, understood as an emblematic figure of research<sup>4</sup>. Tarek Elhaik

The appreciation leads us to think that this peculiar “emblematic figure of research” would work in any of the different panoramas and aspects of the social circuit in which I operate as a researcher. Indeed, such convergence would find in a work of art the primordial record, so to speak, of an “emblematic figure of research.” Seen this way, field work is rethought once again and the methodology becomes a tool that, from its “practicality”, raises questions of a “theoretical” nature. The method challenges us and its forms of writing and inscription involve us. “Experiments in aesthetic form have continued to thrive but conceptual experimentation remains to be desired” (Elhaik, 2018, p. 787), Elhaik would conclude.

However, Elhaik goes further and, using Paul Rabinow’s concept of “assemblage-work”, distinguishes a form of work under which a position is taken. Thus he arrives at the concept of “proximity” (adjacency)<sup>5</sup> in which he concludes that both anthropologists and artists will be able to cultivate new forms of thought, research and inscription, through which conceptual interconnections can be made in their environment. “Many of the essays in this double issue work with such assemblages, but there is a problem at the level of naming ‘it’, conceptualizing ‘it’ beyond merely bringing in powerful theoretical frameworks while acting out mere personalist and moralist deference to the people and practices studied” (Elhaik, 2013:795). Such “assemblage-works” materialize in the field of art in the inscription of representations, the

3. “We suggest, therefore, three simple categories of analysis that might provide new grounds by which such as critical ethnography can proceed with its enduring task of relativization: appropriation, boundary, and circulation.” (Marcus and Myers, 1995, p. 33)

4. Tarek Elhaik (2013) What is contemporary anthropology?, *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, 27:6, 784-798, DOI: 10.1080/02560046.2013.867597

5. “...It is a singular form of work, from a position of ‘adjacency’ that is urgently needed if we are to generate a matrix in which both anthropologists and artists can cultivate new thought-habits through which they will care about the conceptual interconnections and affinities with which they are bound and unbound.(...)”

This ‘assemblage-work’ is one way of naming the capacities at work between anthropology and art, one way of enduring the impasses and damages caused by the categories and exhausted concepts of the ethnographic turn.(Elhaik,2018: 789)

construction and design of works of art, and practices and processes that are part of a whole. That said, “assemblage-works” encapsulate the processual nature of a work as an ethnographic representation. A film, an installation project, the programmed design of an image, and curatorial practice and design would be, so to speak, “assemblage-works” that allow us to investigate, think and represent thoughts, ideas and perspectives. “We ought, perhaps, to cease to confuse our obvious sympathy for and solidarity with those who belong to disenfranchised communities, on the one hand, and the task of finding elsewhere the tools required for thinking about the concept of the ‘contemporary’ that binds contemporary anthropology and contemporary art under the ethnographic turn, on the other” (Elhaik, 2013, p. 796).

In summary, art and ethnography are intertwined through their different practices and territories of thought, opening paths towards a transdisciplinarity that places the creative process and representation at the heart of modern ethnographic design. This “intermedial ethos” manifests itself in various forms: as verbal images in curation, hybrid textual activities, or emblematic figures of research. The film stands as a vital ethnographic tool, an image creation strategy that, supported by a set of works (assemblage-works), allows a comprehensive vision of the research from its data. Curation thus becomes a revealing and essential practice in the creation of images for reflection.

## SKETCHES OF THE ASSEMBLY WORK IN “DEVICE-ORG”

In the strict sense of the assembly of Device-Org, we will address some general points about the work that has been carried out in recent months, based on some ideas or concepts about the assembly, images, sound and archive, which have been the guiding light in this particular task with the image and the creative possibilities that it offers us. The premise with which the montage of this Image-Work began comes from one of the first theories of Soviet montage, particularly from Sergei Eisenstein, for whom the principle of existence of all art arises from conflict,<sup>6</sup> understanding this, in the case of cinema, as a dialectic of images<sup>7</sup>. This allowed us to begin the work of Diseño-Org with a primitive vision of montage, far from space-time continuity and classic narrative visual construction.

## RECYCLED IMAGE

The spine that runs through Device-Org is mainly made up of recycled or reappropriated FER material<sup>8</sup>, a previous work by the director, made during his time as a university student in Cuba, based on the work of Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri. The images of this work, discarded at the time, and the audios recovered from some mini discs belonging to it, serve as support for the assembly of this Image-Work, based above all on the presence and voice of Birri, as can be seen in image 1. The review and reinterpretation, over the years, confirmed that a good part of this kind of visual representation exercise (FER) led to the recording of an entire Masterclass on what was at the time the film “Org” (Birri, 1967-1978). Birri’s testimony and ideas that begin

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6. Sergei Eisenstein, “The Dialectical Approach to Film Form,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 6th ed., [Nachdr.] (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7. Author’s note: Eisenstein developed his theory of montage from the philosophical basis of dialectical materialism, which defines the dynamics of objects as a constant evolution produced by the relationship of two contradictory opposites.

8. FER, Digital, Documentary (FAMCA, 2007).

to intersect with casual, and in many cases informal, conversation constitute the germ of what would later become this investigation. Even in today's sun, we consider that knowing Birri is establishing an immersion in the ORG world.



Image1. Frame of Device-ORG

It is this own archival material, which was discarded and which in some way becomes strange or alien, that, when reappropriated, produces what Di Tella calls, “an experience bordering on the sinister, [...] the experience of when it strange becomes familiar and the familiar becomes strange. And, at the same time, the experience of losing references, of no longer knowing where one thing begins and where the other ends.”<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, the material that at some given moment did not meet the objective within a given audiovisual construction, is transformed into the vital element, already with its essence and meaning transfigured thanks to the years that passed by, of a new project, in our case, of a new Image-work.

## VOICES

Another key element, almost inseparable from the contemporary image, when approaching the montage, – although it may seem obvious to mention – is the sound. Eisenstein himself, already in a stage after silent cinema, mentions, based on his proposal on vertical montage, that sound is not only a mere element that accompanies the image, but that, beyond being subordinated to the action, can achieve an internal synchrony with the image, which would be possible only through movement; thanks to which the deep synchronicity between image and sound is revealed<sup>10</sup>.

It is precisely, within the field of sound, that William C. Wees highlights voice-over as a key resource within experimental cinema that uses recycled or found archives, since it is capable of transforming massive images into private ones, or images other people's own and even autobiographical<sup>11</sup>. From this, for the work on Device-ORG, it was precisely the voices of the different protagonists<sup>12</sup> those that were weaving a kind of common thread that guided the assembly of the images. These dissimilar voices, timeless from one another, sometimes diegetic and sometimes non-diegetic; rescued, of diverse textures and origins, allowed a place to be given to the images or the apparent absence thereof; which were placed on the timeline with the idea of not graphing or illustrating, precisely, what was being heard. Thus questioning, as far as possible, their content and expanding their meanings through the movement that generates the presence and union between one and the other, or its absence, as can be seen in image 2.

9. Di Tella, A. (2010). *Assembly, my favorite problem*. In L. Listorti and D. Trerotola (Eds.), *Found footage: What is found footage and where is it going?* (p. 96). Buenos Aires: BAFICI.

10. Ėjzenštejn, S. M., & Glenny, M. (1991). *Selected Works. 2: Towards a Theory of Montage* (1st ed.). London: British Film Institute.

11. Wees, W. C. (1993). *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*. New York City: Anthology Film Archives.

12. Authors' note: Among those notable in this field are Fernando Birri and Settimio Presutto (ORG editor).



Image 2. Device-ORG frame

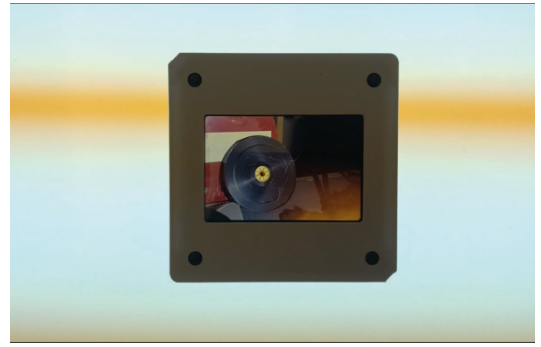


Image 3. Device-ORG frame

## BIRRI ARCHIVE

Another aspect that has directly influenced the assembly of Device-ORG is Fernando Birri's archive. Not only as a source of images and visual, audiovisual, photographic or written resources, but as another way or path for assembly, built from the chronology that the work and discovery of the archive itself suggested. That is, as Ana María Guasch suggests, archives "are necessarily open to the possibility of a new option that selects and recombines them to create a different narrative, a new corpus and a new meaning within the given archive."<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, narration must be understood as an open, non-linear and irreversible form. Which, at the time of assembly, brings with it its own structure, its own form and a proposal on how to show the work with the archive, the work with the object. We refer to the importance of the methodology itself, beyond the audiovisual record. That is to say, the problem generated was how to make the archive itself an important element of Image-Work, and not only by showing a video record or photographs, but as a methodological-narrative-non-linear work. This is why in the montage we include, in addition to images of the silent work in and with the archive, images of objects such as celluloid cans, slides or VHS cassettes, as can be seen in image 3.

13. Guasch, A. M. (2004). The places of memory: the art of archiving and remembering. Subject: International Magazine d'Art, 3, 158.

The aforementioned corresponds, just, to a general outline of the ideas and assembly work carried out in Device-ORG, which is still continuing today. The work not only of editing, but also of recording images with different devices, of reflection on the material viewed, of research and work with the archive, make this work the consequence of a multiple work that demands active participation and perspective. of the editor.

Throughout the years, the Device-Org has become a living entity (film) (living cinema?), with its own pulse and that, contrary to its own nature, must have an end; with the idea that maybe in ten or twenty years someone will reuse or recycle their images or sounds to create something totally new and unique, something infinite.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSIONS

We define ourselves as creators in the field of moving images and sounds, focused on visual anthropology and media communication. Our objective is to capture our projects and research from this perspective. In our analysis, we address representation, methodology and criticism, immersed in the narrative of "true fictions" and how reality is forged. We seek the intersection of disciplines such as visual arts and visual anthropology to foster collaborative spaces where research merges with the dynamism of the image.



The “Org Device” project has allowed us to investigate the poetry of ethnography and its role as a mixed textual genre, challenging the borders of representation in our time. Inspired by Soviet montage theory, which sees conflict as the core of creation, our approach focuses on reimagining images, sounds and archives, moving away from conventional narratives to prioritize an original and conceptual approach to editing.

This work evolves towards a cinema in constant change that invites active interaction with the viewer. By reusing and transforming

our archived material, we venture to anticipate a future in which our works can be reinvented to give life to new creations.

Finally, “Device Org” stands as a confluence of theory and practice, uniting visual anthropology with the arts of the moving image. In it, we question the limits of representation and suggest new forms of reflection and research. This initiative reflects current debates about representation and meaning, underscoring the importance of film as an intermediary and methodological medium in the humanities and social sciences.

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