

A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO VISUALISING THE CRAFT OF THE MILLER

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The article focuses on participatory approaches towards ethnographic filmmaking of the intangible cultural heritage. The case study presented is the film *The Craft of the Miller*, part of the first Dutch nomination to the UNESCO *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. Nomination videos must comply with a prescribed format and length. Moreover, UNESCO calls for a bottom-up approach and a strong involvement of the communities. The article offers some reflections on the dilemmas faced while making the nomination film *The Craft of the Miller*. The working group for its production was constituted of representatives of the Ministry of Culture, the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage and the Guilds of Voluntary Millers. The craft itself was visualised from the perspective of the millers. The author argues that this fits well with recent developments in the discipline of visual ethnography that calls for more reflexivity and a greater involvement of the heritage bearers in collaborative or participatory filmmaking.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO, visual ethnography, participatory film

Introduction¹

One of the obligations for nominations for the intangible heritage lists of UNESCO is that they should be accompanied by a video film of 5-10 minutes. As stated in UNESCO's latest instructions for nominations to the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Representative List)*,

the video should represent different aspects of the element in its current state, focussing in particular on its role within the community concerned, how it is transmitted and any challenges it faces. (...) When preparing videos to accompany nominations, States are invited to employ, to the greatest extent possible, the approach of allowing the communities, groups and individuals concerned with an element to speak about it on their own behalf, rather than relying only on third-person narration, and to have them reflect practices and expressions of intangible heritage in their normal context (Internet source 1, points 15 and 16).

When the Dutch nomination for *The Craft of the Miller Operating Windmills and Watermills* (Internet source 2) was prepared in 2014-2015, there was not much reflection published on how to make such a video. Of course, there was literature on ethnographic film, such as the practical guide book by anthropologist Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2014), writing about ethnographic filmmaking as a dialogue between applied and academic research and practices. But more specific literature on videos for the UNESCO lists was lacking, with the exception of Wim van Zanten's *The Relation between Communities and Their Living Culture as Represented by Audiovisual Files*, presented to the First ICH Researchers Forum in Paris in 2012.

Van Zanten analysed the audiovisual files supplied with the 19 items that were added to the *Representative List* in November 2011. He was very positive about some of the videos. According to him, videos can present information which cannot easily be described in a text. In his view, a video for the UNESCO lists should not be aimed at promoting tourism, but should focus on showing the relationship between the community and its element of living culture. The film should not be made by an artist who presents his own vision of the living culture and is not interested in how the community experiences it. Van Zanten also reflected on the use of *voice over* and music accompanying the video, which in his view should be avoided (Van Zanten 2012: 87-92).

In 2014, both Wim van Zanten and I lectured on a symposium on intangible heritage and film that was part of the *Craft in Focus* festival in Amsterdam,

1 This article builds on discussions with documentary filmmaker Jos Kuijer of the Amsterdamse Filmstichting (Amsterdam Film Foundation). I would also like to thank the Guilds of Voluntary Millers, without their cooperation the video could not have been made.

organised by Wendy van Wilgenburg, a cultural anthropologist specialised in films about the crafts. My reflection of visual ethnography benefited greatly from discussions with Wendy van Wilgenburg and Wim van Zanten. In the Netherlands, a strong tradition in visual ethnography is concentrated at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology of Leiden University, especially its Visual Ethnography programme (see Postma and Crawford 2006). However, my own involvement in filmmaking is somewhat different: starting as a historian writing about visual culture, mainly about photography as a source for historical research (Van der Zeijden 2004), I now work at the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage and teach Intangible Heritage Studies at Utrecht University, coordinating a film production for the *UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003).

Experimenting before *The Craft of the Miller*

When it became clear that the Dutch government wanted to nominate for the *Representative List*, the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage started experimenting with filming some of the elements of intangible heritage in the Dutch inventory. The Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage is responsible for the implementation of the *Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Convention)* in the Netherlands, including drawing up an Inventory of Intangible Heritage (Internet source 3). Filmmakers Jos Kuijer and Caspar Haspels from the Amsterdamse Filmstichting were interested in making the films. They were trained at the Netherlands Film Academy in Amsterdam, specialising in documentary filmmaking. Since the Eighties, they have produced over thirty nonfiction films for public broadcasting companies in the Netherlands. Thus, their background is not so much ethnographic filmmaking but producing documentaries for television, a totally different craft than researching cultural practices and documenting them as part of a scientific research. What I liked in their approach is their great curiosity regarding what people do and what drives them. The first two joint film experiments were one about the annual flower parade in the village of Zundert (Internet source 4), the other about the religious procession of Sjaasbergergank in the Province of Limburg (Internet source 5).

In the discussions with filmmakers Jos Kuijer and Caspar Haspels, I was able to build on my experience as a member of the UNESCO Evaluation Body in 2015, which offered me in-depth experience in evaluating the intangible heritage nominations and accompanying videos. I presented some, in my view, exemplary video files to Kuijer and Haspels. Regarding the Spanish Riding School nomination, I contrasted the 2013 video *The White Ballet* (Internet source 6) with the later version *Spanish Riding School Vienna*, evaluated in 2015 (Internet source 7). To me, the first film was a promotion of a great show much admired by tourists that failed to present the experiences

of the communities involved, while the new video focused more on the experiences of the practitioners. My preferred 2015 video was the *Tinian Marble Craftsmanship* (Internet source 8) from Greece. It presents a tour of a local ethnologist and folklorist interviewing all the different stakeholders involved, from young apprentices in the schools to the marble sculptors themselves, busy working on their marbles and explaining their craft. I have presented this video as an exemplary one to the filmmakers of the Amsterdamse Filmstichting.

For the Zundert film, the filmmakers wrote a script, for which the starting point was a selection of three heritage bearers who could cover the different aspects of the craftsmanship and will be portrayed while practising it. The Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage and the filmmakers both felt, that the film should visualise what is happening in the present and should also convey to the viewers various meanings that the community attaches to this element of intangible heritage. What we felt also is that in a documentary style nomination film there should not be too much 'distraction'. This was not a commercial or a promotional video, for instance to attract more tourists. We of course used no musical score that would not have originated from field recordings. A specific challenge was the UNESCO demand that documenting should not lead to a 'freezing' or musealisation of the tradition, but rather "present intangible cultural heritage as living heritage in constant evolution", as stated in *Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2008: 23, article 109b). Intangible cultural heritage should be presented in an open-ended way, in a dynamic fashion which gives room for further development or safeguarding of intangible heritage.

The heritage bearers should present the story themselves, not just explaining what they are doing but also the cultural meaning behind their craft. A specific challenge for the film on *Flower Parade in Zundert* was that rather than focusing on the parade itself in the streets of Zundert, we felt the emphasis should be on visually documenting the preparations. The flower parade takes a whole year of preparation for the many volunteers involved. These volunteers spend their summer months in their herald's tent, working at welding iron, sculpting styrofoam, and being creative with papier-mâché and small-scale models. Because of the limited budget, we could only afford two days of filming, one during the summer months in the tent where the small scale models were presented, and the other in September during the actual parade itself, where two possible contenders were followed. According to Kuijer and Haspels, a film of only ten minutes should be restricted to three or four storylines, that is to say three or four characters reflecting on their craft while practising it. They built on their experience as professional filmmakers: five or six characters would be too much to identify with in such a short film. For the sake of variation, the characters also need to be complementary; good casting of film subjects offers various perspectives of what the filmmakers and the community want to convey in film.

The community associations came up with the names of people to be interviewed, people with drive and a complementary story. The Zundert film² was well prepared with the support of Paul Bastiaansen, the main organiser of the flower parade. In the view of the filmmakers of the Amsterdamse Filmstichting, documentary filming is not about reconstruction but about creative use of the camera, sound, light and editing, in close cooperation with the main characters.



Figure 1: The cart with Vincent van Gogh made from flowers on the flower parade, Zundert, 2015, © Stichting Bloemencorso Zundert.

The Craft of the Miller

Thus, when the Dutch Ministry of Culture selected *The Craft of the Miller* as the first Dutch nomination to the UNESCO *Representative List*, the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage was already well prepared and took the lead in the formation of a working group. All the Guilds of Voluntary Millers were represented, alongside a representative from the Dutch Ministry of

2 The videos are presented on the YouTube channel and embedded into the webpage of the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage (Internet source 3).

Culture and two representatives of the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage³. During our first meeting, Jos Kuijer and Caspar Haspels were introduced to the representatives of the millers and these community representatives were asked what story they would like to communicate in the film. Even more importantly, they were asked who could represent the heritage with some zeal and sense of purpose.

Telling a story with images, you need a script to structure your film in specific key scenes that are important to communicate the story. How do these millers practise their craft? Which are for them the essential elements of their craft? What skills are involved? How do they pass on their skills to future generations? And, of great importance from the UNESCO perspective: what does it mean for them to be a miller?

The filmmakers suggested portraying three different millers practising their craft. Ideally, one would introduce the specific skills involved in the milling of the grain, another would explain the specific skills involved in operating a 'poldermolen' – windmill, flushing away the sea water from the parts of the Netherlands situated below sea-level. And it would also be great to find a young apprentice, who wanted to become a miller. Flour miller Maarten Dolman was the first obvious candidate as a representative of the Guild of Traditional Flourmill Millers. He works at a mill in the centre of IJsselstein,



Figure 2: Maarten Dolman is starting his daily work in the morning. From the UNESCO portal, © Amsterdamse Filmstichting, 2016.

3 Editor's note: See the names of people and bodies they represent given in Filmography.

being one of forty professionally active millers earning a living at the mill. Actually, the film opens early in the morning, with Maarten preparing his mill for its daily work.

The miller operating a 'poldermolen', Fred Oudejans, was also easily found. Here, the challenge was to film him on a stormy day to visualise what he does to prevent the sea water flooding the land. Last but not least, was young apprentice Christa Bruggenkamp, who was presented to the filmmakers by the Frisian Millers Guild. Apart from her age and gender, her strength was that she had a sense of purpose and was full of ideas about the mill, which she was going to take over from an elderly miller. She wants to transform the mill into a meeting place, where people could have lunch etc. The film concludes with Christa presenting her business plan for the mill, thus bridging the past with the future.

When we presented the draft version of the film to the working group, the millers commented that the documentary film should also include a miller at a watermill. In comparison with the windmills, there are not so many mills in the Netherlands operating on water energy. But because of the different skills involved, in their opinion such a mill should be included in the film. Since this new mill should be incorporated in one of the three storylines in the film, it was decided that Christa should visit such a mill in Eindhoven, in the southern



Figure 3: Maarten Dolman explaining his craft to school children in his mill in IJsselstein. From the UNESCO portal, © Amsterdamse Filmstichting, 2016.

parts of the Netherlands. It is part of her training to get acquainted with different types of mills.

Another comment, this time from the Ministry of Culture, was that there should also be some mention about the broader meaning of the craft of the miller, the heritage aspect. With a declining number of people earning their livelihood from the miller's craft, millers today play a role in transmitting cultural history; they must be able to welcome visitors, taking them on tours, and explaining the background of their craft. It was decided that the filmmakers would once again visit Maarten Dolman's mill in IJsselstein, this time filming a class of school children wanting to know more about the historical background. Receiving local school kids is now part of Maarten's work. These final adjustments would not have been possible without a slight increase in the budget that only provided for three days of filming. Nomination video production required good preparation and quite some flexibility. In this way, most of the requirements agreed on by the Dutch Ministry of Culture and the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage were met.

Documentary style

The film production was supervised by the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Ministry of Culture. The filmmakers played an important role in creating a script with the three storylines, doing the filming and editing the film. They selected images and scenes to present these stories in a satisfactory way for the Evaluation Body and the Intergovernmental Committee, which were possibly not familiar with this tradition of the craft of the miller. The communities concerned were involved in the working group and thus in the whole production process. The film is clearly presented from the perspective of the millers, filmed in their ordinary natural and cultural context, while working in the mill.

When editing the film we discussed how to introduce the main characters. We decided not to include their names, because this was not a personal presentation, but a representation of a specific type of miller. Of course, this decision could be argued for or against. The final version was shown first to the millers presented in the film and then to the working group that prepared the nomination file for UNESCO. All the members of the Guilds of Voluntary Millers were informed during member meetings where I also did presentations to meet the UNESCO obligation that these communities should give their "prior and informed consent" to the nomination (see R4 in *Operational Directives*, UNESCO 2008: 6). However, they saw the film after their "prior and informed consent" was delegated to their representatives in the working group.

The film scenes are all about interaction: for instance, in the scene where Christa Bruggenkamp is learning the craft from two elderly millers. Or in the scenes with Maarten Dolman, where we can see his interaction with his son

and school children. Last but not least, filming is also interaction between the millers and the filmmakers.

An engaged visual anthropology

What can we learn from the example of visualising *The Craft of the Miller* in a more general sense? First, that the preparation of a nomination video is a complex process in which all the stakeholders should have a say, as demanded in the UNESCO instructions. The UNESCO approach asks for community involvement, and therefore we formed a working group. Community involvement is not simply about their “prior and informed consent”, it is also about presenting the craft from their perspective, and letting them tell their own story. The method of the interview suits this purpose much better than a more authoritarian *voice over* by an outside expert. A *voice over* suggests an ‘outsider’ perspective, while we wanted to present the inside perspective by someone deeply involved in the craft (compare Valentinčič Furlan 2015: 102). This not only enlivens the film, it is also in line with the bottom-up approach of UNESCO. It is also important that the millers can explain what their heritage means to them, how and why it gives them “a sense of identity and continuity” (UNESCO 2003, Article 2/1).

Participatory film and participatory video

Most literature on visual ethnography is about documenting or researching anthropological topics. In collecting data, visual ethnography can be an equivalent of the field notebook. It can also be a way of presenting research in a monographic documentary (Omori 2006: 119). Most textbooks call for a reflective approach to the methodologies that are used in visual anthropology (e.g. Pink 2014). An ethnographic film is always an interpretation. Filming is ‘framing’, a long deliberation on what to leave out and what to include, and in what way and from what perspective.

In the early ethnographic filming, the researcher had a steering role, while already in 1975, David MacDougall introduced participatory cinema (MacDougall 1975), which was seen as an encounter between a researcher and the studied community (Worth 1980: 17, as cited in Valentinčič Furlan 2015: 99). The outsider / insider perspective is of course at the core of most anthropological research and one of the reasons that there is more attention paid to what is called ‘collaborative’ or ‘participatory’ research. This means involving the communities researched in formulating the research questions, and giving them a say in the presentations of the research outcomes.

As Shina-Nancy Erlewein has put it, the UNESCO *Convention* calls for a democratic, participatory approach “involving enduring and intensive dialogue among community and other participants of the film as well as the access

to preproduction, production and postproduction processes, and access to the final film" (Erlewein 2015: 33). Making a nomination film for UNESCO implies specific moments of "shared authority", a concept introduced in the nineties by the American historian Michael Frisch (1990) in the context of public history. It describes the trend to involve non-professionals in all kinds of projects, including museum projects. In the context of ICH safeguarding, the Belgian intangible heritage expert Jorijn Neyrinck introduced the concepts of "co-production" and "co-management" (Neyrinck 2014: 333–334) that have gained much popularity in recent years. I add 'co-creation', as the film *The Craft of the Miller* was a joint creation involving all the stakeholders.

What is important from the UNESCO perspective is to empower the 'communities, groups and individuals' that practice intangible heritage. Sarah Pink coined the expression "collaborative / participatory video", stressing the "empowerment" of the participants by "handing over the camera" (Pink 2014: 114–117)⁴. The Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage is already experimenting with this approach, organising workshop sessions for the communities represented in the Dutch Inventory, that are led by documentary filmmaker Wendy van Wilgenburg. Because of technological advances, video making has become much more accessible than in the past. The UNESCO *Convention* calls for these redefined approaches of ethnographic filmmaking, with a bigger role of the heritage bearers. At the same time, it is perhaps too much to ask the communities involved to produce an official nomination video for UNESCO lists, as the video is not just about presenting the community perspective, but it should also convince the members of the Evaluation Body and eventually the Intergovernmental Committee. The production of such film requires a professional filmmaker who understands the filming process, who recognises the essential drama needed and who knows how to structure a creative story in a way that may capture the imagination of the viewer.

For a nomination video, it is always important to find the right balance among the desires of all parties engaged. What does the community want to communicate? What about the Ministry? We have seen that the millers attached much value to the presentation of a complete picture with different types of mills and the various techniques used in them. The Ministry of Culture, on the other hand, wanted to highlight the heritage aspect, the transmitting of knowledge about cultural history. An overarching goal of the film production was how to present all these aspects in a satisfactory way for UNESCO, in which the actual involvement of communities is paramount. As shown in this article on the case of nomination film production, participatory approaches call for experimenting with what Rodney Harrison, a scholar of critical heritage studies, has called "dialogical heritage" (Harrison 2013: 204).

4 See also Pink 2006: 96–101.

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