

Visual Anthropology in Sardinia, Silvio Carta (2015), Bern: Peter Lang AG, 209 pp., ISBN: 9783034309981, p/bk, £45

Reviewed by David Moss, Australian National University

Silvio Carta writes with brio and no shortage of trenchant judgements. His principal aim in this short study is to use examples from films set in Sardinia to defend the claim that visual materials can themselves generate and embody a distinctive form of anthropological knowledge rather than serve only to illustrate knowledge conventionally conveyed in writing (17). For the most part, therefore, he explores general issues arising from the ways social relations in Sardinia have been represented in film and is not concerned, except in an occasional critical comment, to assess the accuracy of the films' portrayal of the features of their local settings. The chapter examining documentaries of the 1930s, for example, mostly describes their directors' strategies for presenting the necessary triumph of fascism in the Italian periphery, not the specific ways in which the contents of their films misunderstand or deliberately misrepresent social and economic life on the island. Italianists who want to learn about Sardinian society will therefore have to go elsewhere. But anyone interested in the strategies and ethics of the representation of social reality in film will find here the kind of open-ended stimulus to thought that Carta sees as characterizing his preferred style of ethnographic film-making. The rather choppy juxtaposition of theoretical exposition and descriptive material in each chapter does not make for a straightforward read, however; and the difficulties are aggravated partly by the author's uncertainty about exactly what the claim for the distinctive epistemological value of film amounts to, partly by the book's construction out of the reassembling and partial reworking of already published materials.

Debate about the use of visual material has been part of anthropology since the first 4-minute ethnographic film was made by a member of the Cambridge research expedition to the Torres Strait islands in 1898. Recently it has been fuelled from at least three directions: the advances in recording technologies which offer wider choices in film-design and demand greater terminological sophistication; the often divergent objectives and theoretical reflections of anthropologists who use visual materials and film-makers who deal with traditional anthropological topics; and the claim that film can evoke dimensions of social encounters and natural settings with an immediacy (accepted) and precision (more controversial) denied to words. Carta provides a brisk summary of the history and scope of visual anthropology and identifies the distinctions its practitioners draw among relevant kinds of film: ethnographic vs anthropological, illustrative vs revelatory, and documentary vs observational. This exercise, overstating the marginality of visual anthropology in the discipline and offering rather too much space to the details of passing classificatory subtleties, sets out the analytical ingredients for the subsequent discussions of two critically-acclaimed films set in central Sardinia – Vittorio De Seta's *Banditi a Orgosolo* (*Bandits of Orgosolo*) (1961) and David MacDougall's *Tempus de Baristas* (*Time of the Barmen*) (1992) – which occupy almost half the book and provide its principal interest.

Both films focus on the experience of livestock herders – figures socially marginal to their communities but culturally central to the image of Sardinia. Carta's litmus test for the anthropological value of the films is the kind of relation the director manages to establish with his subjects and the resulting degree of success in capturing elusive aspects of the protagonists' imaginations and lives. He reproves De Seta for his use of an introductory voice-over (authoritarian and at odds with rest of the film's content)

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Comment: Please provide complete production details of all the films mentioned **more than once** in the text to include in the reference list (except for those already included in the list). These should be alphabetized by director and NOT contained in a separate filmography section. When you do this please follow the following format exactly, including connecting punctuation: Director surname, First name (year of release), *Title*, city location of production house: name of production house. The first time the film is mentioned please also insert the directors' name and year of release, in the following format, after the film's title: *Film Title* (Surname, Year).

and the use of Italian (Sardinian dialect having to be dubbed by Gian Maria Volonté and others and therefore inauthentic and disrespectful) but praises him for involving the villagers of Orgosolo as both actors and advisers in the making of the film. For this reason he suggests we should treat *Bandits* as both a successor to early ethnographic films made by non-anthropologists – *Nanook of the North* by Robert Flaherty (1922) is his example – and a precursor of the kind of participatory, roughly postmodern, film made by MacDougall in a village some 40 miles away 30 years later. MacDougall, with a very successful career as an anthropological filmmaker in Africa, Australia and India behind him, spent five months in Sardinia producing some 25 hours of footage edited down into a film of 100 minutes to capture fragments of the lives of three goatherds. Guided by the director's many published reflections on his own working principles and strategies, Carta analyses *Time of the Barmen* to uncover what he considers to be the key elements of good anthropological films and their potential to create knowledge of a distinctive kind.

Time is organized around the intersection of two axes. As suggested by its title and the conjunction in the opening sequence of ancient and modern instruments of time-keeping – church bells and a clock – the film is built around a low-key depiction of the passage of time: daily, seasonal, generational. But many of the conversational reflections by the protagonists are devoted to the opposing theme of the rupture of that natural passage as a consequence of human decisions: the son who thinks of abandoning herding in order to return to school, his father who wonders what will happen to his own livelihood if he does, their friend who remains unmarried and interrupts the process of generational change. What interests Carta are the uncertainties and ambiguities caused by the friction between the two axes and the

technical and ideological foundations of MacDougall's skill in managing to capture them unobtrusively yet effectively.

Several features are singled out for commentary. Carta notes the rapport established between the director and his protagonists that encourages the unforced intimacy of many of the unscripted conversational exchanges and cooperative activities. He also emphasizes MacDougall's fondness for long takes, shots which convey the perspective of a spectator and allow the capture of the aura around, and immediate reverberations of, any given action. Furthermore he suggests that the success of *Tempus* derives also from the physical incorporation of the director, simultaneously invisible but present, so as to unite him and his subjects in a kind of multiple autobiographical fragment – the digital trace of an encounter made possible only by a self-effacing camera. But no evidence is really offered to help convert this proposition from a truism – directors choose how to position themselves behind the camera, decide what to put in front of it and edit the result, all in ways deriving at least in part from reflections on their previous works – into a convincing insight into the basis of the success of this particular film. The difficulty of presenting such evidence on the page and turning his interpretation into something more than an intriguing possibility points back towards the question of the distinctive epistemological status of film which Carta indicates as his central concern. His discussions of both *Bandits* and *Time* make perceptive points on their construction and content, helping to release De Seta's marvellous film from the broadly political straitjacket created by its initial reception and to introduce MacDougall's engaging work to audiences other than professional anthropologists. But not surprisingly his brief conclusion leaves very much open the complex issue whether film can provide a genuinely independent form

of knowledge or must for the moment remain a valuable supplement to the conventional use of writing in anthropological research.

Films

De Seta, Vittorio (1961). *Banditi a Orgoloso*, Rome, Titanus.

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MacDougall, David (1992). *Tempus de Baristas*, Nuoro, Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico di Sardegna.

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