

Mangrove Music

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On making *MANGROVE MUSIC* – an ethnographic documentary released in 2007 about musicians on the Caribbean island of Culebra.



Perhaps, the strongest theme that emerged out of my experience of making 'Mangrove Music', an ethnographic documentary about musicians of the island of Culebra, was to consider the fissures between the creative practice of music making and place. My initial provocation of making a documentary about the musicians of this particular island was to research the presupposed fixity between music and place. Texts abound on the relationship between salsa and Colombia (Wade 2000), merengue and the Dominican Republic (Austerlitz 1996), tango and Argentina (Taylor 1998), reggae and Jamaica (Manuel et al. 1996), calypso and Trinidad & Tobago (Birth 1994) – as if music and place had an inextricable connection.

But how does one avoid implying that these expressions and their relationship are stable and static? For example, salsa is often claimed by Puerto Rican academic and public discourse as an expression of authentic island national identity – in opposition to assimilation pressures coming from the USA. This kind of research suggests a consistency of place and time that overlooks Puerto Rico's 20th century transformations of its political discourse and its physical landscape. It overlooks the global meanderings of the salsa genre and how it is received and reinvented in different locations. It suggests, for example, that the salsa coming out of Puerto Rican urban centres 20 years ago can be compared with contemporary orchestras coming out of Frankfurt. Hip-hop in Liverpool, Polish clubbers in Dublin, reggae in Argentina, heavy metal in Cuba reads like an inconsistency or some kind of post-modern pastiche, an extraordinary anomaly that is written as if it were subversive, counter-cultural and exceptional. I oscillated between two poles: do these practices represent contestatory and liberating practices that resist the categorisations of modernity; or perhaps they represent an unremarkable continuity of musical creative practice, part and parcel of the mobile dimension of history. In the context of the Caribbean, movement and mixture has been its *raison d'être*, it is the normality of experience. I felt that to write about music

and place can easily fix concepts and histories that have historically been mobile. Perhaps another angle can be more stimulating? I wanted a perspective that looks at what the musicians themselves do, rather than the broader structural scheme of things. I wanted to frame my enquiry in such a way that allowed me to look into the subjectivities of the creative process. Using audio-visual media, I figured, would acknowledge the forms, shapes, colours, textures, and spaces that characterise Caribbean music making – the materiality and corporeality of social life. But narrativising with video does not harness a total experience, just a mere fragment of the moment. It has the potential of concealing more than it reveals, of provoking questions rather than answers. But it can also do the contrary. It requires a different engagement with the process of understanding. The questions it poses are not authoritative but heuristic and its answers are revelatory rather than testimonial. It dislodges the binary present in oratory and debate, where there is a dialectical conversation of concepts and histories that are narrativised linearly, chronologically, following some kind of inductive or deductive logic.

Audio visual media addresses materialities in their state of being, as they lie, as they are (MacDougall 2006). Imagery exists prior to and regardless of thought, in the sense that we encounter the visual before we can grasp a meaning to it. In film, the meanings of the imagery are suggested through a narrative but also through its textures, colours, the sensorial, emotive and experiential affects they cause us. A good documentary manages a balance between a cinematic complexity and having a clear narrative direction. Ethnographic documentaries draw us into a social world – they ask us to engage imaginatively with it, to trust it, to ask it stimulating and meandering questions rather than contesting ones. In this way, they can reach out to us and dissolve the glass of the screen and involve us in a social world that is new to us.

The documentary I did was attempting to draw from these provocations. The documentary does not answer the question of musician subjectivity, but it asks the viewer to be a part of the processes and relationships that are being displayed in the narrative. It asks of the viewer to indulge in the scene, its pace, texture, sounds and let the meaning of the event emerge.

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This clip is a scene from 'Mangrove Music'. For me, the scene speaks to an event whereby a musical instrument becomes a Culebra instrument - it is born. At the end of the process, it has been imbued with the inscriptions of the place. While the drum was probably bought at a music store and was mass produced, making it indistinguishable from thousands of drum like it in the world, it is now made distinct, unique and brought to social life in Culebra. It carries the sign of the earth, of usage; it has been caressed and finessed into being – moulded into a distinct Culebra instrument. Its skin is softened in Culebra ground water and its paint comes from mangrove mud. It has a specific function in relation to other drums; it is the base of a beat, which its counterpart is compared to the flutter of Culebra birds. The drums are given an agency, an acting force, they have power over people and they react accordingly.

These drums have a direct connection between the physical island, the musicians, and tools. The drums carry the markings of the place on their bodies, not unlike individuals living in Culebra. They have been salted by the sea, painted by the earth, scratched by the thorny trees of the landscape, had beer, wine, and blood spilled on them, blessed by the priest on the Easter procession, damned

by moralists, and have serenaded lovers on starry nights. These drums are culebrense and they come alive when played.

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The drums are the protagonists in the above clip. Their protagonism is enacted through a reciprocal relationship with the musicians and audience. They come together in a performative craft, as such video is particularly well suited to address the issue of their embodied performance. Video can depict the subtle ways in which the various interactions, their closeness, their synchronisation, and their capacity to work all point to a sense of intimacy and intimate knowledge of each other. An intimacy that suggests island life and insularity. There are a series of actors, musicians, drums, mangroves that revolve around each other and feed off one another in the construction of a sense of place – an island place.



For me, the power of these scenes comes from their immediacy, from the fact that we are seeing a moment that is unique and unrepeatable yet essential for the constitution of a broader social experience. Their power also derives from the mobility of the camera. We never see the entire space in which they are working but we can construct it imaginatively. We can also get a sense of the experience of 'being there' participating in the process, examining what they are doing up close and sharing the discovery process with the filmmaker.

The challenge of working with video, for me, comes with the engagement with a medium that frames and limits the scope of vision at the same time as it inundates the frame with descriptive data that carries endless symbolic and discursive possibilities. Editing the footage clarifies and delimits these possibilities because it directs the viewer through familiar narrative devices to construct a story. The viewer is then invited to see the documentary as a story; to see the objects, characters and landscapes as symbols, and to make associations and reflections based on the imagery. In this case, the metaphoric dimension of visual ethnography allows the conga to become a social being, mud a place of birth, and bird songs can be suitable percussions.

What I find fascinating about ethnographic documentary is the process by which events recorded in real time, in a tangible historic and social context, take on this kind of symbolic power. To work with the ethnographic documentary is to construct a narrative out of events recorded in daily life. I always kept the camera up to my face, never using the side screen, so as to suggest a direct connection between what is being filmed and my body, my position, my sight. In this sense, it is quite easy to not have a clear distinction when one is filming/observing an event and appreciating its abstract and symbolic potential – its narrative potential – to when one is living. Throughout the process of making this documentary, I understood how the engagement with an expressive medium can sensitise a person to look at life events as a metaphoric narratives or to understand

documentaries as social realities. Making this documentary allowed me to de-centre the historic, sociological, political, economic and other textual renderings of life as exclusive domains of social understanding. It allowed me to embrace the experiential, textural, aural, temporal, sensual, the uncertain, and ambiguous as features of experience to be accepted and included in the creative and learning endeavours of social life.

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