

Symposium Paper: We Want [U] to Know – Ella Pugliese and Nou Va

Review by Caroline Bennett

Whilst many herald the benefits of participatory methods for overcoming issues and encouraging unity for local communities, few have approached the reality of making a documentary film using the participatory process. [We Want \[U\] to Know](#) (WWU2K) is one of the few exceptions, and an extraordinary one at that.

Having just returned to Cambodia for the first time since the film was made in 2009, the filmmakers [Ella Pugliese](#) and [Nou Va's](#) presentation lead us through the life of the film, via its development process and immediate consequences to their findings when they returned to Cambodia earlier this year. Described by Ella as ‘an experiment in participatory video’, the film explores how one village in rural Cambodia used the participatory video process to explore their painful past and make steps towards moving forwards as a community. Recognising the need for something differing to the traditional documentaries on Khmer history, filmmaker Ella Pugliese was approached by [GIZ](#) and the [Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation Cambodia](#) to make a film that, in the time of the UN-backed trials of five Khmer Rouge leaders at the [Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia \(ECCC\)](#), could be used as a tool for working with and for the Cambodian people; Ella believed the only way to achieve this was by using the participatory process in the filmmaking. Being a new concept to the team the process was one of learning for all, and the resulting film is as much a demonstration of that development as it is a film about Cambodia in the times of the trials.



Villagers story-boarding prior to filming. Photo: Leah Roth Howe.

The presentation given by Ella and Va brought to light issues not apparent in the film, highlighting many of the current subjects under discussion about the term ‘participatory’: Who are the people that participate? Whose idea is the ‘participation’? Does it really allow all voices to be heard equally? Can or should we assume an enduring legacy? Is this participatory video or a participatory film? What is the difference, and do we need to make a distinction? Can we combine the two methods? Should we try? Do participatory methods encourage a simplified version of events that ignores the complex nuances of community issues? Is a film made using participatory methods really any more ‘honest’ and ‘authentic’ than a more traditional film? What effect does the participatory method have on the actions and attitudes of the community? These are of course issues of concern, and we discovered in the course of the presentation that whilst in the film we hear many people saying how useful they found the process, there were elements of implicit disjuncture in the community about it (indeed this was one of the things some of the older people wanted to counteract in making re-enactments of their experiences): at the original time of filming some young people believe these ‘old’ stories to be uninteresting and irrelevant to their lives; on returning this year it became apparent to the filmmakers that some of the original participants were ambivalent about the utility of the project. These disjunctures are rarely (if ever) made apparent in participatory film or video, but as researchers and filmmakers are something we should be acknowledging.



Filmmaker Nou Va showing villagers how to use the camera. Photo: Leah Roth Howe.

However, the strength of participatory video comes to the fore in *We Want [U] to Know* in two ways: it provides a challenge to dominant, governmental and externally, imposed narratives on healing of people in Cambodia, by allowing them to explore the issues themselves; in watching the film we are led to contemplate the multiple and individual nature of grief, trauma and healing, unlike in many participatory video projects, where communities are almost exclusively presented as cohesive, homogenous groups, with only one approach to issues. It is refreshing in WWU2K to see an openness to different approaches: some people told stories, some interviewed each other, some re-enacted personal histories, and most fascinating (to me at least), one man painted an expansive mural of the Khmer Rouge period of history, choosing a different form of visual presentation to concentrate on. In showing all these approaches rather than concentrating on one, WWU2K forces us to question meta-narrative presentations of the Khmer Rouge period and the country’s healing process; WWU2K shows us that for the rural Cambodian population, healing is not only achieved through expensive international trials, but also through an opportunity for people to express and share their stories, and in this way seek their own forms of justice and reconciliation.

Coming on the third day of the symposium, Ella and Va’s presentation prompted a more general discussion on the potential use of participatory methods in anthropology. WWU2K highlights the fun of these techniques, but are the methods robust enough to be used in academic research?



Filmmakers Nou Va and Ella Pugliese discuss their film We Want [U] to Know at Göttingen.

Evolving out of Development, the discourse of participatory video (PV) is about working as a group to solve a problem. But anthropology is about learning about other peoples' worlds in order to make more general statements. This might be explored through PV, but we should question how far these aims can be achieved in a group; anthropological knowledge is built on intimate relationships of trust, which are invariably built up one-to-one. To approach anthropological research by immediately looking for a problem to solve is highly problematic and should provoke many questions before its adoption: How much can you learn from a group? Are people honest when together? How do you build trust and intimacy in a group? How do you know the questions identified are the 'real' questions, and that everyone agrees? Why must we assume a 'problem'? What are the implied results of making this assumption (particularly with the associated assumption in PV that we are the ones who can 'help'?) How can you avoid 'invisible' power relations from acting? Can you get to the discords that are so telling about informants' lifeworlds? What about the missing voices: who doesn't take part and why?

On the other hand, good anthropology includes reflection by the researcher on their position, assumptions, presentation of the other, and effect on the research. PV potentially helps this reflection; by enabling people to present themselves, PV encourages the researcher to question their presentation, and it potentially can encourage a more collaborative, inter-subjective building of knowledge. In addition, PV may allow us to align our research interests with the concerns of the community, which is obviously an ideal ethical position.

To really explore the potential of PV as a research tool we need to push beyond the celebratory nature of most presentations and critically analyse both the potentialities for use, and our motivations for using it. We need to avoid the assumptions and paternalistic approach that so often accompany discussions on PV: that PV avoids hierarchy and power relations; that the story heard is the most important one; that everyone who wants to be involved is able to; that video is a culturally appropriate mode of exploration; that the only acceptable approach is one where people film themselves. This last point provoked lively discussions throughout the symposium, with divided opinions on the matter enduring. In the case of WWU2K, Ella and Va found that whilst happy to be involved, many people were not interested in filming themselves, and the final film was not the most important part of the process for most people.

Saying that, the film's life in Cambodia did not end in 2009 when Ella and Va left the community. On returning this year, they discovered that following a series of screenings, giftings, and loans around Cambodia, the film is being used as a means of communication and development - provoking other people to share their own stories. People told the crew that the participatory process and the resulting film were helping the community to accept and move on from their past, something that was consolidated during the filmmakers' visit by a shared tree-planting ceremony to remember those who had passed. In addition the film has been adopted by the ECCC as a learning resource for outreach work. The film has taken a life of its own; in doing so, it is helping provoke more open discussion and sharing in local villages, which is, ultimately, the aim of PV.