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**INTERVIEW WITH  
DAVID MACDOUGALL.**  
*LOOKING  
FOR OTHERS*



**INTRODUCTION**

David MacDougall is arguably the most prominent figure in the field of visual anthropology today. He is a well-known filmmaker, anthropologist and writer that contributed to the development of visual anthropology, regarded not only as a subdomain of anthropology, but as a field of study in itself, that does not depend anymore on the traditional scientific principle of anthropological inquiry for its validity.

In 2011 MacDougall came to the Astra Film Festival in Sibiu, Romania and then to Cluj as a guest of the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca, Romania. As I was writing my PhD dissertation on ethnographic film and anthropological knowledge, I took the opportunity to talk with one of my favourite authors and filmmakers about the topics that interested me at that time. Starting from conflictual definitions of visual anthropology, issues related to observational and intertextual cinema, to differences between written and visual anthropology or how anthropological cinema conveys anthropological knowledge, the discussion led to a more methodological, practical and rather personal question about the act of “looking” as a mode of inquiry and a methodological shift towards corporeal/sensory anthropology.

Looking back, the 45 minutes interview was so inspiring to me that it stood at the basis of every chapter of my PhD thesis and even if some of the issues discussed five years ago are not “burning” anymore, I believe there are ideas that stand at the core of our discipline and many of the issues tackled still deserve our full attention.

**SHORT BIO OF THE INTERVIEWER:** Mihai Andrei Leaha, PhD. is an independent visual anthropology scholar based in Cluj Napoca, Romania. He has been very active in the field of Visual Anthropology in his country and beyond, producing and directing documentaries, organizing film festivals and workshops, participating at conferences and writing articles in peer reviewed journals. In 2008 he founded Triba Film, an independent documentary production company that produced international award winning anthropological films such as *Valley of Sighs* (2013) and *Babaluda* (2012). In 2014 he founded CEVA (Center for Visual and Anthropological Education) through which he initiated and organized innovative and practical educational programs, which involve the use of film, photography and anthropology.

## THE INTERVIEW

**MAL:** This is part of one of my projects that is very simple; it’s called “What is Visual Anthropology?” So I want to ask this question over and over again because while reading all this literature in the field of visual anthropology you come across different types of answers and you never know what direction is going considering the previous work that you read. So it’s all changing, I see it in a good way also but at the same time I think it is confusing for students who start learning about the field. So this is actually my first question. What is visual anthropology in David MacDougall’s sense?

**DM:** I actually don't use the term very often. I tend to use it when I'm thinking about anthropology more generally and the extent to which film could change concepts of anthropology, become a radical form of anthropology, you know, not necessarily closely linked with traditional anthropology. I speak more about ethnographic film usually which I define really as films that have the intention of exploring cultural patterns of some kind. Cultural and social patterns. And because obviously any film can be interesting anthropologically, it can say a lot about the culture that produced the filmmaker and the culture that it concerns, but that doesn't make it anthropological. It becomes a useful document or piece of evidence. Whereas a film that has the intention of actually looking at how people lead their social lives, how it's organised, what are the cultural forces involved, then I think it becomes ethnographic, in a sense. Because of the consciousness of those questions. I think there is a real problem around the concept of visual anthropology because most of the things that anthropology has done in the past, film doesn't do very well. You can say that film is very bad regarding many of the things that anthropology tries to do. For example films are very bad at making summaries or proposing conclusions, deductions. Films are very bad at making propositional statements about the world. And in a sense this is what anthropology keeps moving towards traditionally. It is to examine empirical evidence and then raise questions about it and then arrive at some conclusions and statements, which are believed to hold truth for a particular community of people. So if film is not good at those things, then what use is it to anthropology? But then you have to turn the question over and look at it the other way around and say well, film is very good at some things. It's very good at explicit description and detailed description; or perhaps better not to call it description but depiction, something like that. It's very good at showing the specific case, visually of course. It's very good at revealing the emotional lives of human beings and their interpersonal relations. It's very good at looking at nonverbal communication of posture, gesture, all of these things, the ways that people signal to each other. And it's probably very good also at showing the simultaneity of events, or within an event the different aspects of it that are going on simultaneously. Or it could be things that are not linked but occur in the same frame for example, this thing is going on here, something else is going on in the background in addition to all the activity that is going on there is the whole context, the environmental context, for example, in which all these events take place, the social environment in fact. So this is a kind of way in which cinema works through a kind of a co-presentation rather than a more linear process. There is a lot of talk about how perhaps literature is non-linear or it is linear or language is linear or non-linear and you can quiver over different perspectives about that but the fact is that if you, let's say have a description in a piece of writing, you build up a more comprehensive description through adding detail after detail. And then, the way in

which those come together occurs in the imagination of the reader, to create a cohesive whole, let's say. And that's very different than looking at an image in which you are often assaulted by multiple kinds of impressions, sensations and information. So I think on the positive side, films can do all these things and then you come to the question of what value that might have for an anthropological understanding. And I think, today there is increasingly a kind of convergence of the interests of filmmakers and anthropologists. And that opens a lot of possibilities for anthropology to use film, in that many of the contemporary interests of anthropologists are, for example, the role of the individual in a social group, the emotional lives of people, a renewed interest in material culture in terms of how people relate to the objects around them, and performance generally as a kind of current trope of anthropological research. So from that point of view you could say film has access to these areas of interest, anthropology has been developing over the last couple of decades.

**MAL:** Okay, thank you. Another question would be concerning methodological problems. We all know that over the last 40 years you have advocated for an anthropological cinema. I would like to talk about the methods you used, the positions you took along your career from a methodological point of view. We all know that you began your work with Colin Young and his group and that Young was the promoter of the observational approach, but in "Beyond Observational Cinema" that you wrote in '73 you suggested a more reflexive and participatory approach for anthropological filmmaking. In '92 you advocated for a form of intertextual cinema accusing participatory filmmaking of leading to a confusion of perspectives. Moreover, in recent years we witnessed a coming back to an observational approach in theory as well as in practice but to another kind of observational approach. Please explain this methodological journey and how Young's principles of observational cinema differ from what you later call observational cinema. If it differs.

**DM:** Well, I think there has been a lot of confusion perhaps about observational and participatory or interactive methods because at the time that people were beginning to formulate these ideas, there was a political context for that. In which many of us were beginning to make films, we were resisting traditional forms of documentary and the sort of syntax and assumptions: what we saw as a kind of authoritarian approach to documentary and also an institutional approach to it. Whereas the new cinema was evolving in the '60s was very much an authored cinema, it was very personal in many ways and you know, the difference between the different varieties of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema, observational cinema, these forms in fact, the differences were not very great, it seems to me because the primary characteristics of that approach were that these were films made by individuals from a very in-

dividual perspective. Very often a filmmaker was the cinematographer which hadn't been true before, therefore they often represented a highly subjective view of the world, an exploratory view of one person, a sense of authorship. All of which you could say meant that we should read these films as highly selective, highly subjective in many ways and in no sense trying to present a kind of fly on the wall objectivity, that was often accused of doing. And I think part of the problem of this misunderstanding was because many of the critics who were writing about it hadn't actually made films, and they didn't understand how these films really came into being as personal observations. And I also think maybe some of us are to blame for trying to, in a sense, polarise the argument between participation and observation when in fact the two, in a sense, can't be separated and they are in no way mutually exclusive or opposite. And in fact, if you go back to Malinowski it's all about participant observation anyway. So I think whether these nuances of interpretation have changed over time, I don't know, but I think audiences are much better now at understanding this kind of film. And they're not being fooled and they're not being given a false consciousness about what's going on very often, at least, I think. Probably audiences are more knowledgeable and more conscious of the processes of making the films.

**MAL:** What about intertextual cinema? What was it in your perspective in '92?

**DM:** I think it was just throwing out the idea that you could combine material from different sources into the same film and therefore create a kind of dialogue between the materials. So you could have, for example instead of having a collaborative film where the filmmaker tries to work with another person to make a single perspective, you could have a film in which the filmmaker creates some of the material and then somebody else creates some of the material, maybe a co-filmmaker and this kind of material is juxtaposed and we're given an opportunity to look at different approaches, different aspects of the same subject. That could be a kind of intertextual cinema. Or the intertextuality could be a combining of written texts with visual material, speech, and other elements. That would be one way to think of it. Or it could be another of sort of references. I began making some films in pairs when I was making the Doon School project, so that one film in a sense would come into one another. Even though they weren't together. But if you'd seen one film and then you saw its pair, there would be a kind of resonance between the two, or a dialogue between the two. I think the best example of that is with the "New Boys" and "The Age of Reason", the last two films in the series where some of the same materials are used in the same films but it's edited differently for each film. So the same scene comes up but actually in film number two there is additional material of one kind and less material that appeared in the first film. And so the films have a kind

of dialogue and also the subjects of the film overlap. In the first case it's a film about a group, in the second film it's about an individual member of that group. So you can see him either in the context of the group or you can see him as really the sole subject of the film. And it depends which you see first. It makes a big difference which one you see first. Because if you see *The Age of Reason* first, then you get to know that boy very well and you will see again, when you see the other film looking for him constantly, is he here? Is he here? And when he appears you notice him.

**MAL:** I haven't seen *The Age of Reason*, I've seen *The New Boys*, so I partially understand. You have already talked about the difference between written and visual anthropology, in a sense I would like to know your position now, because one of my favourite quotes from *Transcultural Cinema* is that "*film can never replace the written word in anthropology but anthropologists are made conscious by their film experience of the limitations that words impose upon the discipline, we are beginning to fill some blind spots with film.*" So do you think it's a complementarity between the two or do you think they should be separately taught and separately understood, these two modes of representation?

**DM:** No, I don't think there is any reason why they should be kept separate, you know. That statement really has more to do with the motivation of anthropologists maybe wanting to go beyond the limitations of their writing and looking for ways to express things that they experience in fieldwork but they didn't somehow find a way to communicate in writing. Of course, if you are a very fine writer, you can be maybe more successful, but we can't all be, you know? Not everybody, not every anthropologist is Tolstoy. So that really refers to the motivation but I think the other side of it is related to the question of what constitutes anthropological knowledge and the anthropologist in the field achieves many kinds of understandings, right? And some of that gets sort of filtered and distilled down to expression of (you know) written anthropology, descriptions, conclusions, etc. But there is a lot that remains and then the question for the anthropologist is: I understand a lot of these other things as well, would there be a way to communicate that to the anthropological audience? And film may be a way, you know. But if those understandings don't fit neatly into the way that anthropology has evolved as a discipline, then you have a problem because people say that is not knowledge, that is an impression, that is ... you can't reduce that to statement, you can't summarise it maybe. It used to be that ethnographic films were used by teachers of anthropology as a kind of a wallpaper for their lectures. They would show the film and say, OK, this is, this gives you an idea of the context in which all of this took place, that I'm talking about, you know, «let's get back to serious stuff". And then we began to understand that actually it might be anthropologically



important, that appearances might be anthropologically significant, not just what we could say about them. And so perhaps you begin to gather a shift in which the background starts to come into the foreground of anthropology. And many of the things that were formally considered more or less peripheral to anthropological knowledge assume more importance. And as I said before, we do see that happening now in the way that anthropology itself has shifted its concerns.

**MAL:** In one of the articles George Marcus wrote in Lucien Taylor's collection of essays - "The Modernist sensibility in recent ethnographic writing and the cinematic metaphor of montage" (1994) - , he said that also written anthropologists have operated from a cinematic imagination in their written text, so it kind of went the other way around as well, not only from one way. It was kind of an overlapping of the experiences there.

**DM:** Yes, that's true I think.

**MAL:** You basically answered my next question about how cinema is part of anthropological practice and could enhance the dialogue between different modes of knowing and representing and how does anthropological cinema convey anthropological knowledge, in what way.

**DM:** I mean that is an interesting question in itself because if you just assume that cinema is just a kind of attempt to make a copy of reality, then you're not going to get very far. Whereas I think methodologically what is important is the way in which the filmmaker makes an analysis of the subject and emphasises certain things and other things. The selectivity is terribly important. So that when I am filming I am obviously focusing on some things, on the exclusion of something else and there is a process of highlighting, you can call it exaggeration, even to bring to the core certain principles that I have observed in certain kind of interactions, certain elements that seem to me important. So, I think that's crucial in making these sorts of films. You're operating analytically, you're not seeing your job as simply a reporting job or a transparent transfer of what you've seen to somebody else. It's a much more active process of analysis. And really, it's all summed up I think in the way in which Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson disagreed about method. Whereas Margaret Mead saw film as a record-making device like a (you know), any other surveillance recorder, or tape-recorder or as a scientific instrument like a microscope, a telescope. She, sometimes I think, used those analogies. That they would provide data for somebody else to look at or for you yourself, down the lines, later. Whereas Bateson took a much more active, pro-active approach, that unless you put into your exploration the kind of active pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge, what comes out is going to be very superficial. You have to make that effort to be analytical at the front of every start.

**MAL:** I have always wondered, after having these debates on what is anthropological cinema, what is cinema, what is some sort of art film, which is also cinema. Whereas with anthropological film, what does it differentiate, and how does anthropological cinema differentiate itself from the field of anthropology as a totally different thing? Of course, you have answered this in a way already, but you also stated that visual anthropology is somehow an altogether different discipline than anthropology itself, but that leads me forward to how is it different from cinema as well. Could the answer be a kind of exploration? I guess this is a key word, but please...

**DM:** Well, of course visual anthropology isn't just cinema, it can be still photography, it can be a lot of other things that have to do with visual culture, analysis of visual culture. So I think then turning to the question of how would ethnographic film differ from cinema, say documentary cinema, I don't think fundamentally it does differ. It may differ in its intentions, as I've said, it has a particular purpose which is sociological or anthropological, but in the way that it uses the medium, there's really no necessary difference. Because all cinema is a kind of construction and it's very partial, it's putting together fragments into a certain way to convey a social world to other people. And most of that world actually occurs in our minds even though, you know, we're looking at images. The filmmaker builds up a kind of imaginary geography out of these fragments or shots and the limitation of the frame and everything else takes place here (*pointing to the head*). So when somebody walks off screen, they don't disappear. We still have a sense they're there, somewhere. If they walked off to the left or the right, that's the direction where we might find them next time. So there is that persistence of imagery which is cumulative, it builds up in our minds. Much in the way that writing does, you know, literature operates some of the same way. So John Marshall used to say that the most important thing about film is what is outside the frame, and in a way it's true. If you don't leave any gaps for the imagination of the viewer, you deprive them of the possibility of any kind of interactive relationship with your film. And that, seems to me, results in something that's very shallow.

**MAL:** Coming back to the difference between anthropological cinema and the field of mainstream anthropology you had some serious accusations for written anthropologists, accusing them of eliminating the human being from the presence there.

**DM:** It's not a criticism of anthropologists, I think it's a criticism of the process and it's just a characteristic of the conventions of writing. I was really trying to say, and this had to do in a sense with the transculturality of writing versus cinema or images. That if you write about a person, you maybe give them a name and maybe a description, how they look and



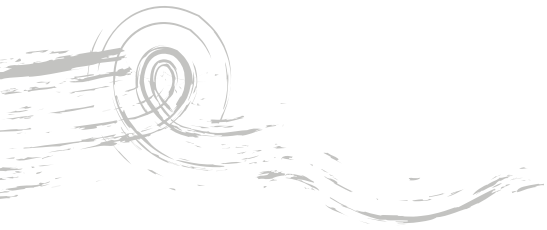
then for the next twenty pages you just say ... you give that person's name. And that stands for the whole person. Whereas if you make a film about a person, in every scene, that person exists as a whole body. It has a head, a body, arms and legs. Whereas in the writing, each time you give John's name. You don't say John who has a head, a body, two arms, two legs. So it's the sort of reiteration that constitutes an important difference, I think. And it also is what permits cinema to reach across cultures more easily because of the physical things we have in common. I do see visual anthropology still as a radical form of anthropology because it's doing something different generally from what anthropologists have done before and it's using new methods, methods that are different, the medium is different and the things that we can say about the kinds of knowledge that it conveys are different. So in that sense it is separate, it could be considered a separate kind of tangent from the way that anthropology developed as discipline in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**MAL:** One last question would be about the concept of looking you developed in the first pages of the Corporeal Image because it was really intriguing to me to read about it in a so-called theoretical book. Looking is something that we all do, it's not something that can be taught or you can learn from someone. You just look, it's something as natural as breathing. If you have the ability to do it, of course, and you also state that looking is done with an intention, but that intention is not intellectual, it's a state of mind that creates a space of awareness. For me it's almost like yoga or something very spiritual in a way, please ...

**DM:** I don't know how spiritual it is, but you know, I think you can make a distinction between seeing and looking. We are constantly seeing, if we can see. But looking perhaps has more of an intention behind it. You look with a purpose here or there, in the camera or at you, and with the camera we also look, and in a sense the camera creates an intention and permits this intention to be amplified, to be framed in a particular way, to be emphasised, and of course to be shown to somebody else. As Rouch said "cinema is the only way I have to show somebody how I see him" or he might have said how I look at him. So the intention is both ... Maybe the intention of how we always look, out of interest in something, out of curiosity, out of desire, out of ... all the different reasons, why we look, out of aesthetic reason and appreciation, pleasure. But the second intention would then be, I want somebody else to see this, I want you to see what I have seen, what I've looked at. And that I think re-doubles the power of the camera.

**MAL:** How do you get into that state of mind? Rouch also spoke about cine-trance.

**DM:** I don't know how you get into it, except out of a fascination with what you're looking at. You have a camera. There's something that attracts your



attention. It could be for intellectual reasons, it could be for a lot of other reasons but it draws you in and then the camera becomes a kind of guide that leads you further into the subject. In a way that if you were just looking, you wouldn't be led.

**MAL:** Maybe because when you have a camera it reflects towards the audience. If you look at something and you follow that thing with a camera then you are not just looking yourself but you're trying to look for others.

**proofreading**

Jasper Chalcraft,  
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**DM:** For others, yes. I think, maybe looking for others is a very interesting way to formulate that.



**MIHAI ANDREI LEAHA**

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Triba Film, an independent documentary production company from Cluj Napoca, Romania. He holds a Master's in Multicultural Studies as well as a Master's in Theatre and Media Studies and a PhD in Ethnographic Film. Leaha published several studies in the field of Visual Anthropology, he produced and directed several award winning documentary films. He is also the CEO of CEVA, the Center for Visual and Anthropological Education.