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Fighting for Nothing to Happen (2015)

48 minutes

Director: Nora Wildenauer

Distribution: Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI)

Dissertation film in the “Visual Ethnography as a Method” track of the MA in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, University of Leiden, The Netherlands

Official Selection and Awards:

Kratovo Ethnographic Film Festival 2015, Macedonia; Society for Visual Anthropology (SVA) Film and Media Festival 2015, USA (*Best Graduate Student Film*); Münchner EthnoFilmFest, Germany; Intimalente Festival di Film Etnografici 2016, Italy; ETNOFilm 2016, Croatia; Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival (GIEFF) 2016, Germany (*Student Award*); GIEFF @ Koblenz 2016, Germany; Pärnu International Documentary and Anthropology Film Festival 2016, Estonia (*International Jury Prize for Best Film on Corruption*); Days of Ethnographic Cinema 2016, Russia; Regard Bleu 2016, Switzerland; ETNOFF2 2016, Macedonia; Framing Asia 2016, The Netherlands; Film Festival of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) 2017, UK (*Wiley Blackwell Student Prize*);

Conference Screenings and other Awards:

American Anthropological Association (AAA) 2015, USA; European Association of Social Anthropology (EASA) 2016, Italy; International Institute for Asian Studies 2015(*National Master's Thesis Prize for Asian Studies 2015*), The Netherlands;

Film Synopsis:

Fighting for Nothing to Happen documents forced migration besides the European refugee crisis. After the volcanic eruption of *Mount Rokatenda*, the people of the island *Pulau Palue* in east Indonesia shall be relocated. But are the planned relocation and the 'new' life at the neighboring *Pulau Besar* really promising? The documentary is based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork and accompanies Father Cyrillus, priest and employee of a Christian NGO, in his efforts to promote and drive forward the relocation project. A worried host community and unclear land rights at the relocation site, a corrupt and unorganized government in the district capital and impatient refugees in temporary shelters are challenging Father Cyrillus and his companions in their attempts to make the best of the situation. Featuring a main character, the film thereby does not only show the brokers' frustration and despair when projects are stagnating, but also provides insights into the topics of disaster management, development and religion, regional government structures in decentralized Indonesia and the local culture of Flores.

Exploring the complexity of development and disaster-induced displacement through audio-visual methods

“It is very complex.” That was the answer I gave to one of my lecturers when he asked me what my main research finding was after I returned from three months of fieldwork and filming a relocation project after a volcanic eruption in Indonesia. Even though this complexity might sound like an obviousness that is not worth mentioning and might be inherent to many situations, it is often overlooked in scholarly research on development and streamlined in government discourses and non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs’) project reports. Whereas projects are constructed in line with the grand discourses of development in linear narratives with a clear problem definition, matching interventions and beneficial results, social practices are usually more complicated (Li 2007:4). Brokers do not simply follow normative scripts but are active agents with individual agencies that take in social, political and economic roles within heterogeneous networks (Bierschenk et. al 2002; Lewis and Mosse 2006:11). In the words of Tania Murray Li, the routine of brokers often has to deal with “messy conjunctures” and layered processes involving different scales of actors and entities (2007:4). Hence, complex and sometimes even contradictory *ad hoc* practices constitute a big part of the everyday lives of development brokers and aid workers. Focusing on their central role thus provides major insights into development that go beyond normative discourses.

In *Fighting for Nothing to Happen*, I pay tribute to the complexity of development as a “category of practice” (Mosse 2013: 228f) and investigate how development brokers merge categories and create and maintain networks out of heterogeneous actors through performative translations (Latour 2005) in their everyday routines. Through this actor-centred and non-normative approach that uses audio-visual methods to focus on relocation practices and performative acts of translation, the film enables the viewer to connect with and understand the agendas of various important actors within the discursive arena of *relokasi* without constructing and reinforcing homogeneous discursive categories. Through the perspective of the main character,

Father Cyrillus, *Fighting for Nothing to Happen* reveals the “cultural richness” and “the subjectivity - the intentions, desires, fears, projects - of the actors involved in these dramas” (Ortner 1995: 190). Instead of simplifying social ‘reality’ for the sake of understanding – a rather reductionist scientific mode of representation that Sherry Ortner has called the “ethnographic refusal” of complexity - I took an ethnographic stance that produces understanding “through richness, texture, and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance” (1995: 173f). In the film, the viewer is confronted with the “‘messy’ witches’ brew” (Foucault 1991: 81) that results from overlapping claims to land, trusteeship, agendas, rationales and practices as well as unclear responsibilities. I want the audience to engage in a “social landscape” (MacDougall 2006: 94f) in which ambivalences, contradictions, errors, disasters and hierarchies unfold themselves. The film further shows the interplay of actions and surroundings, of objects and events, and highlights emotional and performative aspects of brokerage (ibid. 224). Whereas brokers certainly reproduce development narratives, they do not simply strategically perform their roles. They are flexible and continuously renegotiate their positions depending on context and value systems. By creating a multi-layered film that does not flout that complexity, I expose the viewer to the intricacy of development work.

Concretely, I used editing and montage as an analytical tool (Hogel 2013: 214) and followed a grounded-theory based approach. Already in the field, I logged, summarized and organized my footage into rough sequences, which resembled a first step of coding. The logbook helped me to anticipate on editing and to identify gaps in my material. Back home in the editing room, I again started coding. I edited key sequences and inserted written accounts of these rough cuts into my knowledge management program. Thereby, I allowed for patterns to form and topics to surface. Through juxtaposing and connecting different sequences, I was able to create a narrative that enabled me to communicate layered meanings of brokerage and translation (Henley 2006: 386ff). Filmed events thereby became narrative units in making an academic argument (Postma 2006) where editorial choices enriching my scholarly argument prevailed over cinematic conventions.

But the continuous re-editing, re-viewing and re-structuring of my footage did more than contributing to the quality of my film. It shaped what I actually discovered in the field. I was forced to look repeatedly at what actors within networks actually said and did and how that influenced their positioning towards other actors. Therefore, it makes sense not to speak of different perspectives on a topic; rather, (research) objects appear or disappear depending on the focus of inquiry and on the interpretations given to them (Lewis and Mosse 2006: 8, referring to Bruno Latour). Since this focusing gets intensified by looking through the lens of a camera and through editing a film where the un-chosen material will not be visible in the very sense of the word, I want to emphasize that observation and filming imply analytical processes (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009) where theory derives from practice (MacDougall in Hockings, Tomaselli, Ruby et al. 2014: 444).

However, I think it is important not to separate actors from structures. Whereas *Fighting for Nothing to Happen* focuses on the everyday translation practices of the actors involved in the project, the usage of text places these actors and agencies in their historically and institutionally shaped contexts. Therefore, I want to encourage the readers and viewers to combine the film with the accompanying written text of the dissertation, which is available as a multi-media pdf file (Wildenauer 2015).ⁱ

In that sense, *Fighting for Nothing to Happen* and the accompanying written text are of significance to researchers, students, lecturers, professors, educators and development workers and agencies who engage and share an interest in non-normative approaches to development work and disaster aid. I consider the film particularly useful to lecturers in Development Studies, Indonesian Studies, Disaster Studies, Vulcanology and Anthropology, who want to provide insights into ambivalences between discourses and practices, sometimes even frustrating daily routines as well as bureaucratic procedures and the often difficult collaboration of non-governmental organisations and governments. In Visual Anthropology and Film Studies, the documentary can serve as an example of a protagonist film that manages

to include a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints and offers layered interpretations through making use of montage as an analytical tool.

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i If you are interested in making use of the full thesis, please do not hesitate to contact the author under nora.wildenauer@hotmail.de.