

**Operational Report, Observational Documentary
Workshop in Manthali, Ramechhap,
9-22 February 2014,
In Association with SDC/Swiss Embassy, Nepal,
Organised by Contemporary Vision Pvt.Ltd. Nepal,
and Swiss Trainers**

By

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Contract No. 81020204, Project No. 7F-03132 09 01



Operational Report, Observational Documentary Workshop in Manthali, Ramechhap 9 - 22 February 2014, in Association with SDC/Swiss Embassy, Nepal, organised by Contemporary Vision Pvt. Ltd. Nepal, and Swiss Trainers

Main Trainer: Marianne Pletscher, Documentary Film Director and Trainer, Switzerland
Additional Trainers: Gaby Steiner, Editor and Visual Artist, Switzerland
Stefan Tüscher, Cinematographer and Camera Trainer, Switzerland
Hari Thapa, Filmmaker, Contemporary Vision, Nepal
Anup Subedi, Independent Filmmaker and Journalist, Nepal
Siddharta Sakya, Cinematographer, Nepal
Salil Subedi, Writer and Editor

Guest Lecturer: Kesang Tseten

Local SDC-Adviser: Bala Ram Shrestha

Main objective of workshop: To teach aspiring Nepali filmmakers form and techniques of the „Observational Documentary“ a lively way of telling stories mainly with original images and original sound without commentary. A form hitherto rarely used in Nepali documentaries. For details see Proposal dated May 2013 or Terms of Reference of Contract B, Marianne Pletscher.

Participants: 16 filmmakers from different regions of Nepal and different ethnical groups, among them three women. Some with very little, some with more than ten years of experience. Some declared to have been working in all the three disciplines of directing, camerawork and editing, others had very little practical and mainly theoretical knowledge.

Basis of workshop: Hotel Okhaldhunga in Manthali, Ramechhap

Venues of exercises: Manthali village and venues of SDC-supported activities

Annexes: 1) List of participants with their self-introductions and expectations
2) List of film projects finished or begun
3) Scan of one feedback form as an example, including overview of results of assessment

General remarks

Participants and trainers enjoyed the workshop tremendously. Throughout the whole two weeks there was a very good atmosphere. Main difficulties: The participants had very different levels of professional knowledge and very few spoke English coherently. I will explore this throughout the report and reflect on it in the section “Lessons Learnt”. But generally we can state that we were able to give lots of learning incentives to many talented filmmakers. The results of the two weeks, six finalised and two half-finished short films, will all be put in final form by Contemporary Vision and handed over to SDC/Swiss Embassy in Kathmandu.

WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

Day 1-4, February 9 to 12: Theory and First Exercises, Focus and Collaboration

Already during the nine-hours bus-drive on the first day to Manthali trainers and students introduced themselves and got to know each other quite well. So we could start the first working day right away with theoretical explications on Observational Documentary, its consequences for the three disciplines directing, camerawork and editing as well as its implications for their work.

From the first moment it became very clear that we would have to use all possible didactic means to explain this visual format from all angles, as practically nobody knew what it really means. Film clips and a short excursion into film history (the famous film „Primary“) helped to explain the format.

As we believe very much in moving swiftly from theory to practical exercises the afternoon was dedicated to a lesson on perception. This was followed up by sending out teams to film five portraits of the little town of Manthali in five shots. Each group had to choose a specific focus. The lesson, the interesting images, but also the mistakes made helped enormously in increasing the sensibility of the participants towards how a specific objective brings about specific images. Many participants thought about focus for the very first time and considered this very important for their future filmmaking.

The morning of the second working day was dedicated to discussing and practising the subjective camera. Again, this visual technique was new to most of the participants and helped them a lot to understand how to use and practise emotion in filmmaking. Trying to express feelings also brought about a lot of laughter and good vibes, which helped to create a positive atmosphere for all the participants. At the same time, the results of these exercises gave us hints about how to form teams for the planned exercises, which was enormously important, as the professional levels were extremely diverse. This was also a very useful exercise to teach participants how to collaborate. Collaboration in a team is, besides the technical knowledge of camera people and editors, one of the basics of filmmaking. As many participants were used to working alone and had some knowledge in all three disciplines, this proved to be very useful.

After this fruitful morning we went back to theory, explaining to all participants, even the directors, the main principles of camera handling and different types of microphones. While most participants began practising, a little group of three editors started their special training with our editing teacher. The group had such different backgrounds, from almost none to 12 year of simple editing that Gaby started by watching films they had edited in the past with the aim of individualising the training for each of them.

A „flashlight survey“ at the end of the day allowed us to find out if participants were satisfied with how the workshop was going. Most were quite happy, some were able to formulate very precisely what their most important learning experience was so far: That camera positions and camera-movements are not only informative, but highly emotional if used well. That light and colour express emotions as well and have to match from one shot to the other. One participant requested more theory. This allowed us to explain again, that film, especially Observational Documentary, is mainly learnt by practising. But, trying to fulfil all expectations, we promised another theory lesson for the next morning.

The 3rd working day started with the promised hour of theory. We explained the differences between the five most important types of documentaries. In so doing, we brought the students' attention to the fact that not every type of film is suitable for every subject and that Observational Documentaries are best for telling emotional stories, in which people are the main focus – but also that all other types of documentaries may contain observational elements for added emotion and life. By using the „main elements of film-scheme“ students

began to understand how and why and when it is appropriate to use the observational film-technique.



After the theory lesson six crews in groups of two to three went out to shoot their first truly observational exercises in the small town of Manthali. In part, these exercises were assigned to them, others got the opportunity to come up with and research appropriate little stories themselves. The assignment was to shoot no more than 15 minutes for a short story of two minutes. They were advised to take their time, as learning to be patient is one of the essences of documentary film making, especially when it's done the observational way. The task was to have the tape edited by Friday noon, which more or less worked. Some took a long time and were very patient, other fell back into their old habits of shooting news and finished very quickly. This gave us another opportunity to talk about the value of patience. While some of the groups were still shooting, the three editors started with their work on the little films.

While the two previous evenings we had watched a film of one of my Cuban film students ("La Marea") and a Swiss film made in the observational style ("Hiver Nomade"), the 3rd evening was dedicated to watching „Who Will Be a Gurkha“ by Kesang Tsetsen, who had arrived in the meantime for his lecture the next day.

Although the evening films were not a compulsory part of the workshop, everybody attended. The resulting lively discussion helped us to make clear that it takes four years in film-school (such as the EICTV in Cuba) to become such an accomplished filmmaker, and that therefore our two-weeks workshop couldn't possibly satisfy all demands participants had.



Day 5, February 13: Kesang Tseten's Day

Day 5 was entirely in Kesang Tseten's hands. Not only is he one of the most renowned and experienced filmmakers in the country, but also the only Nepali to ever make a full length documentary using only the observational technique on a very high (and expensive) level, the aforementioned „Who Will Be a Gurkha“. I had asked Kesang to join us, because it was important to have a local filmmakers' view on the subject in order to give the participants the chance to experience a lecturer who spoke their language. Furthermore, I thought he would possibly have more authority than myself on the subjects of patience, accuracy and carefulness in filmmaking.

Kesang explained to the group why, after having started with Interviews, he chose to use the observational style for his “Gurkha film” – though more risky, it made for more real and more interesting material. Like us, he showed examples of famous Direct Cinema films with two more clips, in his case „Salesman“ and „Near Death“. He also screened two short Observational Documentaries he had finished recently. Issues like focus, passion, presence of mind, ethics and fairness were discussed anew, which provided the necessary repetition to the lessons we had previously taught. In addition, Kesang also discussed matters such as funding, marketing opportunities and possibilities of showing films on television in Nepal. Participants learnt that the filmmaker has to pay one Lakh Rupee per screening for a documentary. For illustration, he explained to the group that his “Gurkha-film” had had been showing in seven theatres across the country, reaching a total of 75 screenings.

While Kesang gave his lecture, the Swiss instructors and Hari Thapa researched exercises for the five-minutes-films the participants would have to shoot and edit in teams from day seven to day 13.

In the evening, we all watched another Swiss Observational Documentary, which brings to the foreground the merits and mistakes a film has, when a director works all by himself (Giù le mani). We considered this important, because due to economical constraints many of the participants have no choice but to work alone.

Day 6, February 14: The two-minutes Exercises are Finished. Party time!

The day began with a lively discussion about last night's film. The film's mistakes helped us to explain clearly why and when it makes sense to shoot alone as a filmmaker. As a videojournalist a filmmaker is quickly overstretched. This was a very important lesson to learn for those participants, who have only been working alone. It wasn't easy for them to understand and accept that in a longer, more refined, visually and soundwise ambitious documentary, it is close to impossible to work alone.

The rest of the morning was dedicated to theoretical discussions on sound and light in Observational Documentary, followed by practical exercises on how to use microphones and handheld lamps and above all when to use and not to use them. Meanwhile, some of the two-minutes exercises were edited by the three editing students, while others had edited their work themselves on their laptops. Fortunately Salil Subedi, who had been hired by Contemporary Vision as the author of the booklet to be made later, also helped out as an editor, as the group of editing students was too small and inexperienced. Our editing teacher Gaby had to basically split herself in three, helping each editor to finish their exercises.

In the afternoon, most of the two-minutes exercises were finished and we spent a very lively and fruitful few hours discussing camera- sound- and editing work on those little slices of life of villagers and their daily chores. By now, we had gained enough insight in order to form the final crews according to their skills and personalities and we prepared them for the five-minutes exercises to be filmed in the days to follow. The female director and the camerawoman had decided from the very first moment that they wanted to work together – they formed a strong team.

In the evening, a Valentine party loosened everybody up and we got to know participants and Nepali trainers from another, very creative side: Poetry was recited, stand-up-comedy performed, songs were sung, the Didgeridoo was played and the Swiss crew learned to dance Nepali dances. To realise how poetic and full of fantasy many of the participants are helped us a lot in integrating this creativity into their filmmaking during the second week.

Days 7, February 15 to Day 10, February 18: Production Days – Patience and Passion

From now on, there was no official class schedule any more. Each day started with a theory input session, e.g. on the elements of film and their uses in Observational Documentary, on dramaturgy and dramaturgical curves, on all aspects of the use of different types of cameras. Each day, we sent out one or two crews well prepared for shooting the assigned five-minutes exercises on SDC-related items, while the other participants received individual practical training with the most appropriate trainers for their needs, especially the two camera trainers Stefan and Siddharta. Everything became very fluent, sometimes slightly chaotic and it was not easy to keep everybody busy and happy. Things became more complicated when the first groups started to edit, because Contemporary Vision could of course not provide enough editing facilities for several groups to edit simultaneously. As one editor had left for two days due to personal reasons things became even more complicated. In spite of this we generally managed well enough to juggle things. Again, editing teacher Gaby tripled herself.

The participants familiar with editing started doing so on their notebooks and Salil Subedi, who was hired by Contemporary Vision to document the workshop helped out again as an editor. Actually, he turned out to be the most experienced editor of the group by far, having taken an editing workshop with Kesang Tseten's Norwegian editor on the "Gurkha film" a year ago.

By day 10, on February 18, the first near-finished exercise film (No fish but Vegetables) was ready to show, first in the trainer's group and after the necessary corrections in the plenum. We imparted a small lesson on how good, readable subtitles can complete a piece. Like all the others the film was then handed over to Contemporary Vision for fine-tuning after the workshop.



The same evening, one of the participants of the director's group had to leave us without having finished his exercise, because of his Master's exam in Journalism. He too will finish his story back in Kathmandu with the help of Contemporary Vision. Although he had to leave three days early, his feedback on the course was very positive. He thinks the experience will help him a lot to decide whether there will be a future in filmmaking for him or if he should go into online-journalism for his bread and butter, to only consider documentaries once he'll have made enough money. Anthropologically interested, he was very happy to have learnt about Observational Documentary. In the meantime, another participant and his editor, both from Ramechhap, came back from a two-days leave. These leaves complicated our quite elaborate and tricky timetables even further. During these four days we, the Swiss trainers as well as our Nepali co-trainers, were really chewed up from all sides, trying to fulfill the differing individual

needs. But our motto, to teach passion and patience, still worked out very well. Sometimes even late at night participants could be seen editing or structuring their little films. Two groups went back to shoot pick-ups of their half-finished stories.

Day 11 to 14, February 19 to 22: A Surprise, Postproduction, Film Festival and Diplomas

On Wednesday morning we watched an extra little surprise film, which one of our most talented students had been shooting and editing in his spare time. The piece, although full of technical mistakes, is one of the most interesting of the whole workshop. It depicts the life of a homeless woman in sensitive, quiet images. That's why we asked Contemporary Vision to add the little film to the material, which will be handed over to SDS, even if it has no direct connection to the organisation. In the meantime, the film was shown in a Gallery in Kathmandu for Womens Day and can be seen on Youtube. I will closely follow the career of this boy and make sure he will get attention from some of my Nepali filmmaker colleagues.

In the meantime, one group after another finished their films and went through the same procedure of showing it to the Swiss trainers first and, after our corrections, to the whole group before final changes. This was a great learning process for everybody and even the one person that kept asking for more theory began to understand how learning in film works: By learning from mistakes, your own and those committed by others.

Once the frenzy of the shooting days had calmed down, the camera teachers Stefan Tüscher and Siddharta took the opportunity to explain innumerable details of cameras and camera work – the basics many of the participants had never learnt. Editing teacher Gaby, also eager to teach the basics, was too busy helping the participants to finish editing and re-editing their films, often doing half of the work. Directing teacher Marianne worked with the director's group trying to determine where their new talents on observational filmmaking could be used in future and gave them useful tips in the area of storytelling. We also had some interesting conversations on the practically non-existing market for documentaries, save for NGO-work, and the lack of a tradition of investigative documentaries in Nepal, a young democracy. This gave us a chance to dig deeper into subjects, which they had already touched in their session with Kesang a week ago.

As the requests for theory in editing didn't stop and some people wouldn't accept that editing is learnt by doing it for a long time, we decided to squeeze in an hour of "experience sharing in editing" on the morning of the last working day. This event seemed to finally satisfy the need for theory. Nepali students, more used to frontal teaching, apparently need this to complete their learning experience.

Meanwhile, the last group had finished their five-minute-film. Most people were still working feverishly on the subtitles to get their films ready for the Finale, the Contemporary Vision Film Festival. By now, the whole group had grown into a working team and the participants who spoke English helped those who did not. Over time, a real family feeling had developed.



The Film Festival included the following six films, more than we had expected (short descriptions see Annex 2):

- Shivas Motorcycle workshop
- No Fish but Vegetables
- Prosperity and Accessibility
- Equity for forest Users
- Self employed Radhika and Jay
- The Bridge

Two films will be finished back in Katmandu:

- Laxmis Vegetable Farm (director had to leave early because of examen)
- Irrigating Prosperity (director was away for two days)

Everybody applauded everybody and most declared to be very happy. Lots of mutual compliments were exchanged. With the handing over of the diplomas and the usual speeches the official workshop ended, followed by a goodbye party.

On the nine-hours bus-ride home everybody was very tired and we felt like a big family returning from an adventure-trip.

Results in terms of the learning process

Given the vast differences in background we think that all participants could improve their skills substantially. Everybody knows now what Observational Documentary is and where to use it. Only a few will be able to use it one hundred percent correctly, but they know it and have a strong will to continue learning. Those who expected to learn in a 14-days workshop the same as other people learn during four years at film school understood that this is not possible. Even the more experienced participants, who had to „unlearn“ old forms of working were tuning in after a while. The workshop seems to have been very inspiring for everybody. Therefore I am citing a few remarks written on the feedback forms and from e-mails we got after the workshop:

- I learned what and how to make O.D., use camera, sound and light. The whole environment was full of learning. The workshop provided me confidence and to build up patience inside which will help me in my work a lot (Camerawomen)
- The technique of presenting the natural world without interrupting its originality has brought deep impression on me. I got to know the importance of relationship between director and cameraperson (woman director)
- The best part was to discuss about film in both the directors perspective with cameraperson with editors (Allrounder)
- It was great experience with you. Personally I got lots of knowledge about observational documentary. Thank you very much for sharing lots of knowledge with us. Your guidelines regarding documentaries is highly valuable and highly appreciated. Hope we will be in touch via mail. (cameraman)
- Observational Documentary Filmmaking Training/Workshop was one of the most valuable, useful, interesting and fascinating events I have ever attended like that programme. Most importantly the OD administration was outstanding. Resource persons were brilliant, honest and highly sincere to their profession. I want to say again THANK YOU very much. During the period of our staying, positive spring was there, because of pleasant and lovely interaction with all participants and friendly feeling all around.(cameraman/director, oldest participant).
- First of all I am very thankful for what you have taught me and give me that wonderful moment to learn and make mistakes (director)

See also annex 3 example of the feedback form

Two participants, a director and an editor showed up at our hotel shortly before our departure with gifts and more thank yous.

Results in Terms of the Finished Films

We were impressed and amazed that six films between four and seven minutes could be realised within such a short time. Although far from perfect, they all turned out quite nice. Not all of them are purely observational, some of them are too „staged“, others contain fake interviews. But this is nothing unusual at this level of learning. Once Contemporary Vision has added titles and synopsis to each of the films and improved the soundmix, they can all be shown at a presentation or even at a film festival.

Strengths and Weaknesses/lessons learnt

Observational Documentary is one of the most difficult forms of filmmaking. It needs a lot of training and flexibility and a solid basis of knowledge and experience. Three days into the workshop we doubted whether our students are far enough for this kind of training. In fact, most of them were not, but their enthusiasm and their love for learning made up for their lack of previous knowledge and we think it was worth it all the same. Could the choice of participants have been better? Our Nepali Co-Trainer Anup Subedi says this wasn't the case; nearly all of them pretended to have lots of experience when subscribing, which seems to be the case in all similar workshops in Nepal.

The number of participants was a bit too high. We had limited it to a maximum of 15, but accepted a 16th person at the eleventh hour, because she was a woman, a local and a Dalit. Again, we don't really regret it, because her editing training may mean a brighter future for her. There is no other editor working out of Manthali.

The fact that only about half of the participants spoke coherent English made conversations very difficult, as nearly everything had to be translated. In spite of the excellent translators, especially Anup Subedi, this made the workshop very tiring. But when we suggested better English would have helped, Anup answered that this would have prevented the participants from the East and the West from taking part. I think he is right.

Sometimes we had logistics problems, because the otherwise very well organised implementing partner had not provided enough fast editing suites, capturing possibilities and harddiscs, due to his tight budget. Two conflicting computer systems (Mac and Windows) complicated things further. Newer cameras with digital cards would have made everything easier, but that's not how people in Nepal work at the moment. But as a whole, Contemporary Vision had prepared and organised everything to near perfection. Transports and technical support worked very well, thanks to a very friendly Jeep driver, Ram Sharan Bhjuel, and Krishna Ohm Thapa and his technical team who prepared cameras and sound equipment, cleaned them and worked as additional instructors when necessary. The hotel was the best that could be found in Manthali, simple but clean, offering good food (if one likes Dal Bhat every day.....) The hotel management, a very nice family with charming children, helped where they could, and they even became friends.

The SDC/Swiss Embassy Liaison officer, Balaram Shrestha, turned out very helpful in finding projects for exercises. Only one didn't work out due to logistical difficulties.

The Nepali co-trainers were a superb team and extremely helpful as translators (language and culture), as resources for editing, camera and direction, especially dramaturgy. We grew together as a real intercultural team and in the debriefing session they especially praised the familial and warm atmosphere we managed to create and the astonishing discipline of the participants, which they said was unusual in workshops in Nepal. Salil Subedi was certainly exaggerating when he said that this workshop was a milestone in the history of Nepali documentary filmmaking, but it shows his enthusiasm for our work. They all said that they had learned a lot too. Though, of course, we Swiss learnt most of all. Each intercultural workshop teaches one so much about oneself and the way one communicates.

Outlook and Sustainability

The workshop will leave traces. Nepali trainers and students will remain in contact on a Facebook-site that already exists. The Nepali trainers became friends and will go on working together. Most of the English speaking participants already befriended us Swiss trainers on Facebook.

As for myself, during and after the workshop, I was able to give suggestions to Contemporary Vision regarding the form in which the films on the SDC projects could be prepared for SDC and for the booklet and learning video that Contemporary Vision will create. My main work is

now done and by submitting this report, including the financial report, the contract is fulfilled. My last remaining task is to approve the reports Contemporary Vision has to submit before May 15, 2014.

Marianne Pletscher, march 12, 2014