



A Cinematographic Ode to Life in a Single Shot

In conversation with director John Paul Sniadeki¹
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by Cristina Formenti

In 2012 Libbie Dina Cohn and JOHN PAUL SNIADEKI directed *People's Park*, a single shot documentary that guides the viewer in a journey across Shaocheng Park, Chengdu's largest public park. The camera moves slowly and continuously for 75 minutes, capturing a spectrum of the humanity that everyday populates this green and recreational area situated in the middle of the urban center. Shot from a lower point of view than that of eye level, the film returns us the sensation of breaking through the park at child level. Along its journey the camera encounters a variety of people dedicated to different activities (such as dancing, singing, eating or chatting), who either ignore the filmmaker's presence as they are immerse in what they are doing, wave in the direction of the lens or stand, sit and lay still as statues, while the camera scrutinizes them.

¹ The interview took place on May 10, 2013 at Mediateca Santa Teresa (Milan) on the occasion of J. P. Sniadeki's participation to the 4th edition of Docucity – Documentare la città, the documentary film festival organized by Università degli Studi di Milano's division of Mediazione Interculturale e Comunicazione and CTU, in collaboration with the department of Beni Culturali e Ambientali. During the festival Sniadeki presented his film *People's Park* for the first time to Milan's audience.



In order to capture this display of life and performances in a single take, Cohn and Sniadeki shot every afternoon for three weeks, following a pre-planned route that from time to time they had to adjust or modify due to the rubs encountered on their path. During this time laps the two directors completed twenty-three takes and had to abort approximately other twenty for different reasons. Among the finished shots they then ended choosing the nineteenth.

People's Park, that is a project of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, is a window on the everyday life in Shaocheng Park that permits us to experience not just the visual, but also the sonic sensations of walking through this space, by proposing the actual ambient soundtrack. Therefore, as the camera makes its way through the paths and the diverse areas of this recreational space on a sunny afternoon, we can hear a milieu of voices, sounds and types of music, that span from traditional opera to pop beats.

In a way, with this documentary Cohn and Sniadeki seem to have put into effect André Bazin's idea of a cinema where montage is refused and reality can unfold on screen in all its ambiguity.

C. Formenti: Did you and Libbie conceive *People's Park* as a single shot film from the start or did the location itself suggest how to capture it?

J. P. Sniadeki: We initially started the film in a more conventional way, thinking about montage and the construction of the place. We also intended to infuse the film with more of a narrative by inserting dialogues or scenes. But one of the park's qualities that really drew us in and seemed to be outstanding was a condensed spatial orientation of different pockets of performance and activity (i.e. dancing, singing, cooking, working, playing music, sleeping and so on). And we realized that shooting the entire film in a single shot would consent us to retain this kind of soloistic quality and to render the atmosphere between these various modes of human expression that were going on in the park. We also figured out that we didn't need a more interventional kind of structure. We decided that this pageantry of life was enough, as it was a kind of ode to life itself.

C. Formenti: So you and Libbie chose the single shot mainly for a geographical, topographical and sort of sensorial reason?

J. P. Sniadeki: We also craved to give the people, the plants, the sidewalks and all the other objects in the park somewhat of an equal treatment. We wanted them to have a democratic treatment. Therefore, it seemed more appropriate to us to make a film where the montage happened in the filming versus shooting in the park and then coming back and editing something together.



C. Formenti: In portraying the life in the park without imposing a hierarchy on the people and the elements in it you also intended to mirror a Chinese masterpiece, right?

J. P. Sniadeki: Yes, we were inspired by a famous Chinese scroll painting, called *Qīngmíng Shànghé Tú/ Along the River During the Qīngmíng Festival* (Zhang Zeudan, 1085-1145). It is a panorama that depicts all aspect of daily life during the Song dynasty and every class of people (from the baggers to the nobility), giving equal attention to them all. We wanted our film to be a kind of spatial and temporal 21st century digital version of this painting.

C. Formenti: Are there other reasons why you decided to structure *People's Park* as a single shot?

J. P. Sniadeki: There are at least other two reasons. First of all, the people who we were closest with, and that first drew us to the park, were amateur performers and we wanted an approach to filmmaking that somehow paralleled that performative aspect. The single shot seemed perfect, as it enabled us to introduce all kind of unexpected, contingent and undetermined possibilities proper of a live performance. In other words, we chose it because it permitted us to mirror the same kind of bodily practice and performative quality of our subjects.

Secondarily, Libbie and I are both influenced by Buddhism. And shooting a single shot is a sort of meditative daily practice, as it requires an intense mindfulness, especially from the person who is holding the camera (i.e. Libbie in this case). In fact, you have to be completely aware and reactive to what surrounds you in order to be able to respond to the range of people and activities by which you are surrounded. Moreover, Buddhism also links back to the notion of not individuating, but trying to show an inter-subjective space.

C. Formenti: By treating your subjects democratically, you could have ended up depicting just a big Chinese mass. Instead, you managed to create a multitude of sketches of individuals. Had you developed a relationship with the people portrayed in the film before shooting the documentary?

J. P. Sniadeki: Our relationship to the people in the park changed throughout being there. I had been going to the park for a number of years before shooting this documentary, so I knew a few persons there. And when Libbie was there we became closer friends to more people. The ones who we were closest to are the men and women dancing at the end of the film. We had dinner and talked with them and we let them know that it would have been nice if, when we arrived, they could dance at their best, because we wanted that to be the climax of our documentary.

We also knew the boys who pour water over their heads and asked them too to do something flashy for us. And, as we were shooting the film over and over during



the three weeks, we developed relationships with more people. But, of course, the park is a public space, so there were probably hundreds of persons we had no relationship with and to whom we could not explain what was going on. None of the people standing and staring were staged. They were just reacting spontaneously to the strange sight of a half-Chinese girl sitting in a wheelchair, with a camera in her hands and microphones sticking out, being pushed really slowly by a tall white guy.

C. Formenti: So basically *People's Park* is a balance between planning and chance.

J. P. Sniadeki: Yes, we counterbalanced structure and spontaneity. The structure is the single shot and the continual tracking forward movement, whereas the spontaneity is given by the fact that we wanted everything to unfold as it would before the camera. We chose a position of receptivity versus a position of seeking or hunting or trying to dig out stories.

C. Formenti: In conceiving this documentary, were you influenced by a particular filmmaker as well?

J. P. Sniadeki: The single shot is something used from filmmakers all around, with different backgrounds. There is the single shot of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) or of Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990). There is the more commercial, industrial single shot that shows the master shot and the more art cinema one, like that of Béla Tarr. Then you have the experimental cinema of James Benning and Sharon Lockhart, who have made a number of films that are predicated upon duration. And I think that all those filmmakers were definitely back in our mid, or at least in my mind. But we didn't first set out to make a single shot film and then decide where to shoot it. On the contrary, the park itself determined it.

C. Formenti: In which terms did your anthropology studies at Harvard University shape your filmmaking approach?

J. P. Sniadeki: I come from a filmmaking background and then I came into anthropology. I had never taken an anthropology class until six years ago and I didn't go into a classic ethnographic film program where you learn how to make a film that explicates a particular set of cultural data or salvages and records a disappearing culture for posterity. That might be a side effect of the work that I am doing, but it is not the goal. I'm not that interested in constructing a particular theoretical form of knowledge. I'm interested in a more experimental form of knowledge. In particular, I'm interested in challenging and exploring what is possible at the intersection of art and anthropology. And Sensory Ethnography Lab, the program I was involved in at Harvard, is more in that direction.



C. Formenti: So can we still say that ethnography shapes your work?

J. P. Sniadeki: Of course we could still say that ethnography shapes my filmmaking, because I take ethnography seriously, ethnography being the commitment to spend time in a place to get to know a culture, a life world and a language, to be observant and not to rush, to participate in the world in which you are interacting and to help create some sort of representation of it. However, I don't think that this is a prerogative of anthropologists. Documentary filmmakers do that as well. In fact, every person that engages with a different life world will become the kind of human being that observes and participates.

C. Formenti: That said, are there any aspects of anthropology that linger in your films?

J. P. Sniadeki: In the works that I've been doing the critique of the construction of knowledge that anthropology presents and the requirement that it asks for the ethnographer to be clear about its positionality and to be self-reflexive are both present. Not that I'm saying to myself: "I'm an anthropologist, so I need to include those moments when the film subject makes reference to me". It's not an obligation that I feel, but I'm not afraid of those moments. If they are productive and interesting, I leave them in. In my works you can often find moments where you think you are watching a kind of observational film and then suddenly somebody starts to talk to the camera and to me. That's quite different from those documentary practices (e.g. cinema vérité and direct cinema) that still want to hold on to the notion of an objective view of a fly-on-the-wall catching life unaware. I don't think that that is really possible. Therefore, I'm interested in acknowledging the camera, the social process of filmmaking and the presence of the filmmaker.

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