

## "Action": Publishing Research Results in Film

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**Key words:**  
filmmaking;  
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**Abstract:** Researchers commonly disseminate their research findings in academic papers or books that have a selected and limited target audience. A potential method for disseminating the information other than the traditional academic is through film, but this means tailoring the material to this medium and in many cases collaborating with people who have the necessary skills. The aim of this article is to reflect on the experience of making a film from the researcher's perspective. I will in particular shed light on how the filmmaking team worked together and provide examples of the preceding research, as well as the shooting and editing of the film material. The long period of research leading up to the film was a major factor in its success. In addition, all of the people involved have to be willing to share their experiences, recognize each other's expertise and be able to compromise. The film was much more than just an extension of the ongoing multi-site qualitative research. The shooting not only provided new insights into people's lives but also forced me to think much harder about my research and "the fieldwork." The additional costs and efforts related to the film can be justified by a transdisciplinary understanding of research that requires the results to be disseminated beyond academic circles, attract attention from policymakers and activists, and also allow the subjects of the research (who generally do not read English academic articles) to become an active audience.

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## 1. Introduction

In the world of social science, words, numbers and diagrams remain the primary means of information transfer, exchange and the production of knowledge. Since the 1980s, there has been a methodological shift towards the study of visual objects and the use of digital technology for social science studies (SOORYAMOORTHY, 2007). Similarly there is a general growing interest of social scientists in visual methodologies (BALL & GILLIGIAN, 2010). Despite an even longer tradition of ethnographic filmmaking and photo essays (e.g. WAGNER, 2006, p.56), still, in most cases research results are published at the end of a project in journal articles, books, final reports and conference presentations. In most cases such publications restrict the audience to fellow academics. Opportunities to discuss how for example research findings may apply to the lives of the people we have conducted the research on are not impossible but limited and depend on the choice of journal or conference (GERGEN & GERGEN, 2011; KEEN & TODRES, 2007; SOORYAMOORTHY, 2007). The active task of communicating research to practitioners, policymakers and people is often seen as lying beyond the scope of the research process (KEEN & TODRES, 2007), a fact that has been criticized and tried to overcome through transdisciplinary research (e.g. BACKHAUS, 2008; POHL & HIRSCH HADORN, 2007; GIRI, 2004). Any kind of dissemination other than the traditional academic way involves a search for an appropriate medium and tailoring the material to this medium (POHL & HIRSCH HADORN, 2007). Since researchers are not often really trained to publish their research in any form other than on paper, they are required to collaborate with people who have the necessary skills. One medium that has increasingly attracted social scientists is film (e.g. CRESSWELL & DIXON, 2002a). There are several valuable handbooks and guides on the whole process of filmmaking (e.g. CURRAN BERNARD, 2007; BARBASH & TAYLOR, 1997; ROLLWAGEN, 1988; SILVERSTONE, 1985). Similarly, the potential of filmmaking as a participatory research tool has attracted increasing attention from researchers (PARR, 2007; KINDON, 2003; PINK, 2001, pp.77-92). The existing publications about filmmaking mainly consider the interaction between the filmmaker(s) and the characters of the film. Much less has been written so far about the whole process of filmmaking within the filmmaking team from a researcher's perspective (partly GANDY, 2009; PARR, 2007). Therefore the article is targeted towards scholars of subjects where publishing qualitative research in writing remains the norm and using different media and inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration is rather seen beyond the research project. [1]

What happens if a researcher has rich empirical material from the field and a sound conceptual understanding and wants to turn his/her research results into a film? What does it mean in practice to "tailor" the material to such a specific medium? How does this collaboration with other partners work? How do you negotiate the content and responsibilities within a team? How is knowledge communicated and translated? These are the questions this article focuses on in order to allow to consider the filmmaking process. To discuss these questions I have taken the example of a documentary film project that was an output of a

four-year research project into labor migration within and from Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. [2]

Like any other data or text, the footage and finally the film itself is not neutral knowledge but inevitably "constructed" (also PARR, 2007, p.116). Filmmaking is a reflective process, requiring time and producing something "that you can look at and think about and change ..." (GAUNTLETT & HOLZWARTH, 2006, p.85). In cinematographic terms, reflexivity translates into a series of processes and techniques that are largely dependent upon who is behind the camera and who is directing, who edits the resulting film (CATALAN ERASO, 2006, p.30), the filming techniques, the locations selected, the people being filmed and the choice of narration. A transdisciplinary endeavor such as documentary filmmaking requires strong collaboration, the "... recognition and invitation into the hard core of the disciplinary self" (GIRI, 2004, p.348) and an ability to cross the boundaries between disciplines and creating spaces for dialogue (O'NEILL, 2008; ROBERTS, 2008; POHL & HIRSCH HADORN, 2007, p.87). First of all, the filmmaking team relies on a good working relationship with the characters of a film. Secondly though—and this is the core concern of this article—filmmaking also demands constant collaboration among the team members, and the researcher, the camera team, the interpreters and the editors all have their role to play in this. These collaborations entail negotiations—some easy, some more difficult—that makes filmmaking a powerful relational space (BARBASH & TAYLOR, 1997, pp.74ff.; PARR, 2007). LONG (2001, p.243) describes these encounters of actors with different forms of knowledge as social "interfaces" and complex situations in which different values, interests, and forms of knowledge intersect. By collaborating in a film project, the researcher actively decides to step beyond the boundaries of academia to create and cultivate interfaces for co-producing and sharing knowledge across disciplinary, professional, cultural, gender and age boundaries (ZINGERLI, MICHEL & SALMI, 2009, pp.189-190). A decision to co-produce and share knowledge is far from trivial because it implies exposing oneself to other cultures of knowledge and allowing oneself to be challenged. Looking at those "interfaces" in the knowledge-sharing and production process of filmmaking enables an explicit recognition of and transparency about existing dependencies and ways of communication, translation and intermediation (ZINGERLI et al., 2009, p.187). [3]

The aim of this article is therefore to reflect on the filmmaking process, starting with the initial idea and ending with the editing of the film. The focus is not on the film as final product, nor is it on how it is received. A filmmaking process can be broken up into different stages (see Table 1), and these are reflected in the structure of the article. First, I describe the pre-production process, which includes the decision to make a film, preliminary research, the institutional set-up and the team. Second, I shed some light on particular moments of shooting, and third I reflect on various stages in post-production, in particular editing, which includes choosing the film material, developing a narrative, subtitling and finding a title for the film. I conclude with a critical re-reading of the film project.

<b>Pre-production</b>	
January 2006	Beginning of the research project
April-July 2006	Fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia
<b>Production</b>	
Dec 2006 – June 2007	Preparation of film project
July 2007	Shooting in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan
<b>Post-production</b>	
Aug 2007 onwards	Editing
Dec 2007	Intermediate meeting and editing at the collaboration partner's office, NGO Panos South Asia office, Northeast India
Feb 2008	Final editing with entire team Panos South Asia office, Northeast India
March 2008	Film finalized (distribution)

Table 1: Main steps in the film project [4]

The article at hand is that of a researcher taking stock, drawing on my personal experiences as project leader, researcher and collaborator. The film was for all of us not a full but part-time project and the entire filmmaking process took 15 months. The basis for this article is all the minutes I took after each communication by Skype or phone, the 178 e-mails we exchanged and 18 hours of footage. In addition, I have relied on three intermediate versions of the film, and the "making-of," which is part of the DVD. In the 15 minutes' "making-of," the members of the film team provides glimpses of how the idea for the film evolved, the background research, an introduction to the team, logistics, technical ups and downs, and how we processed the footage and named the film. [5]

Two terms I use in the article require further explanation. The people featured in the film are usually called "subjects." However, "subjects" can be also called "actors," acting out their lives, more or less self-consciously or "characters" hinting at how filmmakers construct and develop characters on the screen (BARBASH & TAYLOR, 1997, p.7). Footage describes the entire film shoot. [6]

The film is entitled "The Other Silk Road" (2008). The released DVD contains a 5-minute trailer, the 15-minutes "making-of" and the 28-minute film. The film focuses on how people in Kyrgyzstan experience labor migration since long-distance mobility was essential in the region due to nomadic livestock husbandry. More recently, following the independence of Kyrgyzstan in 1991, migration has been mainly motivated by people's quest for work and a better quality of life. This migration generally goes from the south of the country to the northern capital of Bishkek, the neighboring country Kazakhstan or more distant Russia. The documentary traces the migration routes from the south of the country to urban destinations and explores the impact of migration, the multi-locality of people's

livelihoods and the ambiguous experience of benefiting from remittances and access to work and education while in many cases suffering from a lack of fundamental rights and from the separation of their families. It is also a story about the elderly, who remain with the children in the rural areas and share the benefits of remittances, but also realize that the younger generation might not necessarily return to the rural areas to maintain the traditional family bonds and caring duties. [7]

## 2. Pre-Production

### 2.1 Research and reasons for making a film

Research is the major part of the pre-production and, like editing (post-production), typically takes several times longer than shooting (see also BARBASH & TAYLOR, 1997, pp.69ff.) As outlined above, the whole film project is embedded in a larger four-year research project. The idea for a film is based on research work I conducted over four months in 2006 (April to July), which focused on labor migration and multi-locality in Central Asia. A case study was carried out in a rural municipality (*aiyl okmotu*) of Osh *oblast* (province) in southern Kyrgyzstan. The municipality is about a three-hour car drive away from the *oblast* capital of Osh and in 2006 had a total of 9,911 inhabitants. A listing of households and absentees revealed that Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Almaty in Kazakhstan and Moscow in Russia were the major places where migrants worked. Based on these insights I decided to do multi-site research (e.g. AMELINA, 2010) and chose five households with the widest possible range of migration patterns (household members only within Kyrgyzstan, only in Kazakhstan, only in Russia, or a combination of all three). First I interviewed the household members who had not migrated and, as a second step, I followed the routes of the household members who had migrated and interviewed them in Bishkek, Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Moscow (Russia). To close the cycle, I then returned to the place of origin and discussed the experiences with the non-migrants. Return to the home country Kyrgyzstan was part of many discussions among migrants but also among people who were only indirectly affected by migration. I then opened the sample. I talked to other family members (who were not necessarily part of the same household) as well as friends and co-workers in the different research sites. By the end of the cycle, I had interviewed 68 women and 90 men. Furthermore, I carried out interviews and group discussions with key people from the village of origin, including the mayor, teachers and social workers. At two schools, both the teachers and pupils were interviewed in group-discussions (THIEME, 2008, Forthcoming). [8]

I planned to revisit the interviewed persons in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 2007 as part of the project schedule. This planned visit encouraged me to start thinking about other possibilities for communicating the results of my research than writing. I decided to make a film for several reasons. While carrying out multi-site research, I felt that the change of landscape, language and lifestyle could be captured much better in pictures than on paper. Furthermore, audiovisual tools add an extra dimension to the presentation. Films allow social

behavior to retain its unity rather than separating it through the use of academic categories and schemes (DE FRANCE, 1989, cited in CATALAN ERASO, 2006, p.6) and people and places can be represented in a more authentic manner (CRESSWELL & DIXON, 2002b, p.1). Representing research in moving pictures and sound can be far more evocative, immediate and detailed than in a written text and can stimulate additional perceptions among people who record them as well as among people who view them (WAGNER, 2006, p.57). Written material is more codified and textualized and more external categories are likely to be imposed on the result. Nevertheless, also actors in a film leave much unexpressed possibly requiring additional background about the film (ASCH, 1988). Second, the topic has great political relevance in the region but there is a lack of local research into the topic. In a transdisciplinary spirit (POHL & HIRSCH HADORN 2007), I felt a strong need to communicate the research to a much wider audience than solely a scientific one and to encourage the audience to question their existing conceptions of migration from the country. This broader dissemination would also provide the interviewees with a platform to speak out and at the same time to become part of the audience. Furthermore, as GERGEN and GERGEN (2011, §9) discuss, performative social science such as theater, art or film may "more effectively motivate interest and action, and they can enhance dialogues on important societal issues." Third, as I had no previous experience, I wanted to learn more about the process of filmmaking and how film editors or a cameraperson would look at and process film and other research material from an artistic as well as a technical point of view. In addition, I assumed that people from different origins and a different professional background would contribute different ideas, perceptions and observations. [9]

## 2.2 Setting up the team

Since it would be my first encounter with film, I decided to search for collaborators who had experience of filmmaking. My collaborator was the NGO Panos South Asia, particularly the office in Northeast India. The reason for collaborating with an Indian NGO to make a film in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, although uncommon, was the institutional setup of the research project. [10]

The research on migration in and from Kyrgyzstan was a four-year research project (2006-2009) dealing with the geographies of migration and multi-local livelihoods in Central and South Asia<sup>1</sup>. The research project is embedded in a larger international research program (The National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South), in which researchers are explicitly encouraged to collaborate with other disciplines and stakeholders in both policy and practice (ZINGERLI et al., 2009). Therefore I collaborated particularly for the work on South Asia with Sanjay BARBORA, head of the Panos South Asia office in Northeast India, who was a PhD scholar and colleague of mine on the NCCR North-South program. Panos is an international NGO with a strong focus on media

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<sup>1</sup> The affiliation and inspiration for covering both regions in the research project was partly because my former research was related to Nepal-India migration (THIEME, 2006).

"... to foster debate on under-reported, misrepresented or misunderstood development issues. We believe that only by including the voices and views of those most affected by these issues—usually the poorest and most marginalised people in society—will lasting solutions be found" (<http://www.panos.org/taxonomy/term/28>, [Accessed: December 16th, 2011]. [11]

As an international NGO, Panos South Asia was very interested in my work in Kyrgyzstan. Their media expertise and my personal research partnership with Sanjay BARBORA encouraged me to collaborate with the office beyond the scope of the existing research agenda. For the film project Panos provided the film equipment, a cameraman who would accompany me to Kyrgyzstan and subsequently the editorial staff as well as covering the financial costs of editing and producing the DVD. My research project covered the total cost of pre-production research and the whole crew's expenses during shooting in Kyrgyzstan. For financial and logistical reasons we limited shooting to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and excluded Russia (Moscow). [12]

Apart from equipment, I was responsible for the entire pre-production. I provided Panos with all knowledge, data and first ideas for the film from my research. Furthermore, I arranged all logistics and research and recruited the research and film assistants for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. [13]

Members of the core team were:

- Myself, social geographer, principal investigator, University of Zurich, Switzerland;
- Film assistants and interpreters for Russian and Kyrgyz into English:
  - Zarina OSOROVA, social anthropology student at the American University Central Asia (AUCA) Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and later holder of a Master's scholarship in Social Anthropology, University of Berne, Switzerland;
  - Arslan KARAGULOV, economics student at the American University Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan;
  - Mahabat SULTANBEKOVA, linguistics graduate and now an NGO employee in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan;
- Panos South Asia office, Northeast India:
  - Sanjay BARBORA, social anthropologist, head of Panos office;
  - Kazu AHMED, social anthropologist, cameraman and editor;
  - Sushmita KASHYAP, editorial assistant;
  - Ushma BARDOLAI, freelance film editor subcontracted by Panos South Asia. [14]

The crew for the shoot consisted of five people. The two editors joined the team later on. However, many other people contributed to the film during post-production. [15]

### 3. Shooting (Production)

While pre-production was mainly my responsibility, shooting is an interface where the team closely collaborates face-to-face; different areas of expertise and experience become crucial. On the one hand I had to introduce the cameraman to the situation in the field, provide background information and access to people and locations. On the other hand the camera operator has a better understanding of the medium of film and has the audience in mind (also BARBASH & TAYLOR 1997, pp.78-79). Similarly, research assistants are key to enable oral communication. I introduced my team to people I had already met a year before. They now had new stories and experiences to share but would maybe also ask different questions of the team members. Working in a larger team to make a film would also demand a greater level of reflection about the entire research project. Therefore, although the research in 2006 had laid much of the groundwork for the film, the entire film project including shooting and editing would turn out to be not only a tool for better research communication but also a process of discovery (also ASCH, 1988). [16]

After several months of preparation via e-mail and Skype, we finally met in July 2007 and shot for 3.5 weeks, traveling from Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek to the south of the country. Our team was not only from different disciplinary backgrounds; it was also multicultural and multilingual. We had planned to travel in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and then meet up in Northeast India again to edit the film. Therefore the film's central theme of how people and places are related would also apply to us, and through the film project our team was drawing places together both virtually and physically. The cameraman was excited about his first trip to Central Asia. In the "Making-of" he remembered the car journey from Almaty in Kazakhstan to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan:

"The most exciting thing was when we drove through these pastures in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where we thought: Man, these were the steppes Genghis Khan came from you know ... we read so much about Genghis Khan and Baburnama—these are famous books, these are absolutely amazing books and historical accounts. When you read them you think about those times and these pastures are still the same" ("The Other Silk Road," Making-of, 2008: min 03:02-03:31, <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/243>). [17]

We shared rented flats in Bishkek and Almaty. In the south of Kyrgyzstan my host family from 2006 provided us all with accommodation. Of course we paid for board and lodging, but their support made the whole film project much easier. In addition they arranged travel and a host family with a yurt for our planned two-days shoot out on the pastures. [18]

### 3.1 About places and people's reaction to the camera

As we only had a limited amount of time, we started shooting on the very first day. My former research assistant (Mahabat SULTANBEKOVA) could only spend the first two days with us due to a new job engagement. I was therefore the only person in the team who already knew the places and most of the people from the year before. Kyrgyzstan was an entirely new field, especially to the cameraman. Despite the problems entailed by shooting in an unknown place, his initial response to places and people demonstrated the advantages of his being unfamiliar with his surroundings. He filmed many things that I took for granted. In general, the entire team very quickly learned that we would have to think much more visually. The cameraman observed people closely and filmed details such as how people work, their movements, their hands and gestures, market and street scenes. Since he lacked the local knowledge, the interpreters and myself as researcher had to ensure that we filmed other crucial centers of mobility such as train and bus stations, roads, urban and rural landscapes, and other visual illustrations of people's oral accounts. [19]

My greatest worry before shooting was how people would react towards the camera. The size of the team, the presence of the camera and the set-up of interviews were all very different from my earlier research. Characters had to be placed in front of the camera, at an appropriate distance from the microphone (Picture 1).



Picture 1: One of the participants of the film in close distance to the camera (picture taken by Kazu AHMED, 2007) [20]

The interpreter had to sit close to me so that the translations could not be heard in the film. At the same time the interpreter could not be too far away from the person being interviewed. The set-up sometimes looked very artificial. So every shooting was a trade-off: we had to make people feel comfortable and at the same time framing is crucial to produce high-quality footage. Therefore I was even more surprised that people were generally very open to the idea of taking

part in the film and in some cases even became more talkative and supportive. There are many reasons for this. First, I knew the people from the year before and this new visit indicated that I was still interested in their lives—and this was a major step towards building a trusting relationship. Second, many found being part of a film project exciting. People found out that film was an appropriate medium to convey their experiences and worries about working and living under precarious and often irregular conditions. Some people explicitly wanted their voices to be heard and faces shown, hoping that policymakers in particular would see the film. At the same time the presence of people from Northeast India and the general set-up of our team interested our characters a great deal. The cameraman soon established a trusting relationship with the film characters. In many cases people were happy to tell their stories and also revealed stories and details they had previously not told or which I hadn't noticed. In some cases the larger group also helped to draw attention away from the camera or from one single person. Despite the cameraman's and the researcher's many responsibilities, we should not forget the importance of the interpreters, who were mediating between all of the people involved and had to be constantly alert (CRANE, LOMBARD & TENZ, 2009). [21]

My reservations about how people would react to the camera were also partly because I felt a stronger responsibility towards the people we talked to. I had met them the year before when they had already provided me with much personal information for my research. It was very unlikely that the cameraman would ever return, but I would maintain my contacts for professional and also personal reasons. Therefore it was of particular concern to me that all the characters involved should feel comfortable. I also knew that I would be the person who would distribute the final copies of the film and who would be seen as responsible for the film. Knowing that a film could only guarantee limited anonymity, I insisted that people first agreed to the shooting and then later re-confirmed that they still agreed to the material being used in the film. Shooting with a digital camera also enabled us to show people parts of the footage. Nevertheless where, when and how people agreed to being shot was also strongly influenced by the location and legal status of the migrants. [22]

We shot in four different places: the place of origin in the rural area of southern Kyrgyzstan; on the villagers' summer pastures; in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan; and in Almaty, a large trading and wholesale market town in Kazakhstan about a 3-hour car journey from Bishkek. In the rural setting (in the municipality as well as on the pastures) we did not have much trouble filming. People knew me and although they were busy with their daily work, they always found time to contribute to the film (Picture 2).



Picture 2: Some people also felt encouraged to perform in front of the camera such as horse riding on the pastures in South Kyrgyzstan [23]

An example of greater hesitation towards filming was provided by one woman we met who worked on an irregular basis in Kazakhstan. She stayed temporarily with her parents in southern Kyrgyzstan because she had just had a baby. She told us her story, but asked us not to show her face in the film. We therefore used her story as a voice-over while we showed footage from Almaty in Kazakhstan. [24]

In Bishkek we partly had to shoot in large wholesale markets and this was already a bit more difficult. Markets are crowded and noisy places, people's fellow traders and competitors are close at hand, and customers frequently interrupt the interview (Picture 3).



Picture 3: Busy retail market in Kazakhstan [25]

In 2006 the interpreter and I used to walk through the markets without a camera and talk to people for a shorter or longer period of time, and we would come back again another day or at a different time. Now that we had a camera and that there were at least three people in our team, we naturally attracted far more attention from the surrounding people—and this was exactly what our respondents in many cases wanted to avoid. The general trade-off we found in these situations was to shoot scenes of the markets and interview the people separately outside the market, then merge the sequences together in the film. Another family I knew from last year invited the team to their house. In other cases we also managed to shoot our interviewees at times when the markets were quieter (early in the morning or shortly before closing). I was all the more frustrated when I realized several times during editing that we had very interesting conversations in the market but could not use the footage due to the low audio quality; people's voices were either not fully audible or else there was too much background noise. The market scenes in Kazakhstan are very similar. The major difference is that people generally work on an irregular status, which makes shooting in the markets even more difficult. As expected people were not willing to be filmed in front of the camera in the markets, so once again we shot general scenes in the markets but talked to people outside. In Kazakhstan we also kept the team as small as possible and filmed only in a team of three: the cameraman, one interpreter and myself, the researcher and interviewer. [26]

We had to concentrate on shooting during these 3.5 weeks, but keeping the film in the foreground was sometimes a challenge for me as researcher. As I had met most of the people earlier in 2006, I wanted to know how things had been going and what they had experienced over the previous year. In most cases these stories became part of the footage and worked very well. Nevertheless, there were also contradictions between the necessity of taking close pictures for the cameraman and my interest in talking to people and observing things. As people were generally very supportive of our filming, they revealed details I hadn't seen the year before. For example, we filmed the closing of Bishkek market; we wanted to see where people stored their goods and the logistics and labor involved. As the markets are large, with hundreds of very small, narrow lanes and they are generally very crowded, making it impossible for more than two people to walk abreast. Furthermore, a camera immediately attracts attention. We agreed with one of our characters that we would come the next day shortly before the market closed. I arranged the scene, but the cameraman had to shoot it. The narrow setting of the market made it impossible for me to follow. For a moment I felt disappointed because I had originally wanted to accompany them in participatory observation style and ask questions. Of course I saw the scene afterwards on video and I could ask our character afterwards about details, but every social geographer knows the value of being on the spot and of talking to people in the immediate situation. [27]

Those three weeks of shooting in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan would be the only occasion for a long while when we—the cameraman, researchers and interpreters, would be together as a group. After shooting my Panos colleagues would return to Northeast India, the interpreters to Kyrgyzstan and me to

Switzerland. It was therefore crucial to process and prepare as much material as possible for the film. The first priority was to translate all the footage of people talking. Therefore, after shooting, my colleagues and I would sit down and watch, translate and discuss the film material. All the translations needed to correspond to the film sequences because they would form the basis for cutting and editing the film material later (see below). [28]

## 4. Post-Production

### 4.1 Editing

In the "Making-of" the cameraman and me have a discussion:

Susan THIEME: "When I got back to Switzerland I was so exhausted, but I was also so excited about the shooting we did in Kyrgyzstan."

Kazu AHMED (laughing): "No honestly speaking, we didn't know what to do. We had so much material. We felt—let it go for a while maybe it will come together as a film on its own" ("The Other Silk Road," Making-of, 2008, 0:10:15-0:10:33, <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/243>). [29]

The feeling of being overwhelmed by the material and impressions from empirical work is one that many researchers probably share. Leaving Kyrgyzstan was a special moment for several reasons. Firstly, after 3.5 weeks of intense shooting, living and working in a team, we went back to our different home countries and working environments. Secondly, while I took the transcripts of the interviews to Switzerland, the cameraman took all the film material to Northeast India in order to burn it onto DVDs so that I could watch it. At that moment, I had a strong sensation that my role was about to change, that to a certain extent I was having to give up "my data" and the editors would now come to the fore. [30]

Editing involves making important decisions about how the footage is arranged, timing, the length of each scene, music, voice-over, text such as subtitles and credits, and consequently about the film as a final product. SOORYAMOORTHY (2007, p.559) is very critical of outsourcing the editing:

"... missing the opportunity to construct the movie the way you wanted to create it. It is not advisable to contract the editing job out to someone who is neither familiar with the research topic nor with the intentions of the research filmmaker." [31]

Nevertheless, it was precisely the lack of expertise in filmmaking that encouraged me to cross the boundary of academia and to co-produce and share knowledge with other experts to make a film. We would work with the same material but through different lenses and would have to find common ground to translate the material into a film. The cameraman would be involved in editing, but was joined by a professional freelance editor (Ushma BARDOLOI) and an editing assistant (Sushmita KASHYAP) at the Panos South Asia office in Northeast India. Both had never been to Central Asia, and I met them only later. [32]

The editing was done in three main stages. First, the cameraman and his colleagues in Northeast India sent me all the film material on DVD to Switzerland. The editors asked me to draw up a draft of a 2-hour script from the footage and transcripts of the interviews. Using this script, they cut the footage down to 2 hours, which formed the basis for further editing. During that phase we communicated only via e-mail and Skype. At a second stage—about 5 months after shooting in December 2007—I met the editing team in Northeast India because my research partner and I had long before planned to present our research and a rough cut of the film at a migration seminar in India. Therefore we spent a couple of days working intensively on the rough cut of the film and honed it down to a shorter version to present and discuss. This kind of test screening is the best way of finding out how people unfamiliar with the topic react. Later on, various colleagues in our workplaces or at home also provided useful comments on the rough cut. [33]

The third and major part of the work took place in February 2008, when we took four weeks to finalize the film. Since we needed editing and cutting equipment, a studio and editorial staff, we agreed to meet up in Northeast India. The interpreters (Zarina OSOROVA and Arslan KARAGULOV) and I therefore joined up with the team again and came to Northeast India. [34]

We agreed that the film should be no more than 30 minutes long, because it would then potentially fit into TV schedules, lectures, talks and formats for film festivals and would also be attractive to policymakers. The major storyline was still under discussion by the entire team (myself, editors, cameraman, and interpreters). There were some moments (and days) when the editors had to implement our ideas and either worked jointly with the interpreters or entirely alone with the footage (Picture 4).



Picture 4: The editors and interpreters jointly working on a film sequence [35]

Once a sequence was completed, the editors, interpreters and myself watched it again and either decided on adjustments or approved it. After approval, the interpreters and I were once again mainly responsible for ensuring if the subtitling was correct. People's own wording cannot usually be published exactly as they have said it. Characters sometimes meander and talk for too long or at a different pace, which makes it a challenging task subtitling scenes appropriately. During subtitling I was once again aware of the difference between text and film. In papers, in most cases, the readership only reads the translation. The author of the paper is solely responsible for a correct translation. In a film, however, people can see and follow the original voice of the characters and if they can understand them, they can check how accurate the subtitles are. Moreover, the characters might watch the film by themselves and might be able to check if everything has been translated correctly. Therefore, a film makes the contribution of the characters far more transparent despite the power of the filmmakers to shape the film by editing and cutting. Therefore, it made me reflect even more on the need to translate people's voices carefully and accurately and to acknowledge the role of interpreters in shaping the produced material (CRANE et al., 2009, p.41). Although we had already subtitled everything, the interpreters and I spent another full day on the final version of subtitles for the 30-minute film version. Each time the interpreters went through a sequence, they found passages they weren't yet satisfied with and wanted to change. The wording as such was translated correctly but sometimes it was not exactly what the interpreters believed people wanted to express, as will be shown again below when I discuss the title of the film. [36]

#### **4.2 Voice-over**

We also decided that the film would need a voice-over. My project partner Sanjay BARBORA and I co-wrote the commentary near the end of the editing stage. By that point, major parts of the film had already been edited, and the inspiration for the commentary came both from the visuals of the nearly finished film and our original knowledge of the topic. At the same time the editors had some room to fine-tune the film. Writing the commentary first might have subordinated the pictures to the narration. After long discussions and much reworking we had a three-page commentary for the 30-minute film. Those three pages were then rigorously discussed by our whole team and edited and polished by the film's editorial team. In general, deciding whether a film needs a commentary or not, and how it should be written, is a delicate undertaking. Some authors such as CATALAN ERASO (2006, p.18) argue that narration is one way of imposing the categories and values of the filmmakers and disempowering the subjects of the film, who thus become objectified and lose their power to communicate. CURRAN BERNARD (2007) takes a more pragmatic view of commentary or voice-over, and if done well, sees it as the most efficient way of moving a story along, "... not because it tells the story but because it draws the audience into and through it" (p.211). [37]

Even if the whole team does go for a commentary, this does not exclude negotiations on the best way of doing it. The following example gave me a taste

of the interface (LONG, 2001) of passing the boundary of academia and deciding to work on a film in a team. During my first research work in Kyrgyzstan in 2006 and again during shooting in 2007, one topic that repeatedly came up was the particular hardships suffered by women. Although migration makes both women and men vulnerable, women face particular forms of vulnerability that intersect with one another. Middle-aged migrating women experience a devaluation of their education and struggle to handle the multiple roles and expectations of being breadwinner, mother, wife and daughter-in-law, supporting the older and the young generations that have been left behind (also THIEME, 2008, Forthcoming). In 2006, women and men of different age provided various accounts of those hardships, which were confirmed by my own observations of the women's working environments. Although the 2007 footage contained visual material showing the hardships of work—women carrying huge bags, negotiating with customers, sitting in hot or windy and chilly open markets—we had no characters (neither women nor men) commenting on this. Both the interpreters and I felt uneasy about this and suggested that we either skip this topic entirely or support the pictures with a strong commentary. The editors were not at all worried about this aspect and argued from a visual point of view. They highlighted how strongly the pictures show the hardships of women, how migrant women sit in open markets, how non-migrating women care for children, how they carry water and so on. BARBASH and TAYLOR describe this as a common conflict between filmmakers and social scientists, which stems from a diverging notion of a film's analytical potential. Social scientists are more unfamiliar with the medium of film.

"They want much more explicit kinds of statements than film is capable of providing, because film works by specific instances that can't necessarily be generalized. Film is very often ambiguous about things that writing would clarify, or that writing would take a single position on. ... It is often difficult for people who express themselves through words to accept a form of communication that works so much through suggestion, implication, reference, ambiguity, and comparison without conclusion. It can be frustrating for them. And there's a tendency to try to push it in the direction of being more definitive ..." (Interview with David McDOUGALL, Berkeley California, 1993, cited in BARBASH & TAYLOR, 1997, p.75). [38]

Since the interpreters and I demanded much more explicit statements, we finally agreed to add some commentary. We gave the one-minute scene in which the audience sees women packing and selling goods in the markets and streets, as well as women in rural areas, the following voice-over:

"... This transition can be relatively easier for men. There is a disorienting silence when it comes to women on how they conform to their roles as mothers and wives. Even as they contribute to the household, national and global economy, the unpredictability of the labour market constantly demands that women improvise and adapt their lives. The hardships in this process are enormous. Women who remain in the rural areas have their own problems" ("The Other Silk Road," 2008: min 17:24 – 18:07, <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/243>). [39]

My colleague Sanjay BARBORA speaks the commentary. We felt that he had a suitable voice for this. In addition he was with Panos South Asia and would have been easily available if we had to rework the narration. The narrator is unseen and has no role in the film other than moving the story along. As the initiator of the film I narrated the "making-of the film." [40]

### 4.3 Giving the film a title

Finding a title for the film is every bit as important as the subtitling. The title generally decides whether people will become interested in a film, but a title also raises expectations. During the whole process of editing in the team we had many discussions about what mobility meant for the people we had filmed as well as for ourselves. To emphasize the local context of the film, the interpreters and I suggested giving the film a Kyrgyz title. We suggested "Talaa" or "Sirt." The discussions around both terms became an interesting example of how interpreting goes far beyond the translation of language and also involves translating the meaning of social and cultural practices (CRANE et al., 2009, p.40). In the Kyrgyz language, the people we met rarely use the term "migration" and if so it would be the Russian translation for migration (*migracia*). In Kyrgyz, however, they prefer the words "sirt" or "talaa," "Sirt" means "outside." People would say, "My son is outside," meaning the son is outside the village—he has left the village. "Talaa" can be translated as "field" and people would say "empty talaa" ("the fields are empty") or "my son is in talaa," meaning that "the fields are empty or nobody is left to work on the fields anymore," but it also describes the fact that the son is somewhere far from home without exact specifying the place they went to. The editors also liked the idea at first, but then discussions moved on. In the "making-of" the audience can see that we finally agreed that a Kyrgyz title would be not accessible to a wider audience. We agreed that we had to think about people who were not familiar with the topic of migration or with the region. Therefore we wanted to reuse the name "Silk Road"<sup>2</sup> following the idea that something is happening on the Silk Road again. We discussed using the empty fields, the empty fields along the Silk Road, the Silk Road, the other Silk Road. Finally we agreed on "the other silk road," hoping that the film and the title evoke the metaphor of the Silk Road to define this contemporary movement and the trade that is intrinsic to the definition of the route. The characters' village of origin becomes the point of reference from where this movement begins and where it is hoped it will end one day when the migrants return. It is a story about individuals and their families who earn their living in distant places and then cope with the problems and challenges this life in different places brings with it. It is also a story about the elderly, who stay back with the children in rural areas, who share the benefits of remittances but also hope that the young people may return and maintain the traditional family bonds and responsibilities for care. [41]

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2 The Silk Road, also called Silk Route was an ancient trade route that, "... linking China with the West, carried goods and ideas between the two great civilizations of Rome and China. Silk came westward, while wools, gold, and silver went east" (Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/544491/Silk-Road>, accessed: December 21, 2011).

## 5. Concluding Thoughts

At the end of March 2008 we launched the film in all the team members' countries and those where the film's different stages and lives were set. The film was screened on many different occasions, for example in Kyrgyzstan in the village of origin, at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival of Kyrgyzstan and the Ethnographic Film Festival in Switzerland. The film is a stand-alone product and reached an audience far beyond academic circles. It opened up various opportunities for discussion and further collaboration beyond research. [42]

The aim of the article was to reflect on the filmmaking process from a researcher's perspective. In particular it aimed to shed light on the encounters and interfaces a researcher has once she or he decides to collaborate with others to make a film and use a completely different methodology from writing papers. I would clearly encourage researchers to communicate their results not only on paper but to experiment with other forms of communication and envisage projects that cross the boundaries of academia. The following experiences were the most crucial: the preliminary research (pre-production) and the established links with people laid the foundations for the film and contributed to the success of the project. My knowledge about the topic of migration, the region and the people mitigated the fact that we had limited time for shooting and that the film team had never worked with each other before. In addition, the collaboration beyond academia for the film project was successful because this kind of exposure and exchange was considered beneficial for the topic and the persons involved. If such a project is to be successful, the researcher has to be willing to share his or her data and experiences and to allow others to cross the boundary of research, just as all the other people involved have to be willing to share their knowledge. Furthermore, it is recognizing each other's expertise and an ability to compromise that make it possible to share and produce new knowledge. The film I have described above only exists due to the pooling of numerous skills such as research, translating, shooting, editing, and logistics. Even more crucial was the fact that the film's characters were in favor of the film project. Although the film team had never worked together before and the film project was hard work, it was the excitement and uniqueness of this opportunity that kept the whole team going over such a long time. At the same time, teamwork also reveals critical moments in negotiations and that everyone eventually gets tired of working together. However much I enjoyed the project, I also found it crucial to set a clear end to the project when each of us could go back to working on their own again. [43]

The film was not just an extension of my ongoing qualitative—mainly interview-centered—research. The shooting provided me with new insights into people's lives and how they viewed migration, but it also forced me to think even harder about "the field," namely the research theme and data, my motivations and position in the field, the people involved, what the consequences of their being part of a film were, and the potential and limitations of a documentary. Not only the film as an end product but the entire process of filmmaking was very beneficial to my research. However, during shooting in particular, being

responsible for the characters as well as logistics and the presence of a large team can also cause stress and put great pressure on you to get things right. [44]

There was substantial financial and personal investment in this film, but this could be distributed and reduced through a transdisciplinary collaboration between the research program (NCCR North-South) and the NGO Panos South Asia. In true transdisciplinary spirit, the additional costs and efforts could be justified by the fact that research results have been disseminated beyond academia and attracted attention from policymakers, activists and also allowed subjects of research who generally do not read English academic papers to become an active audience. [45]

Although the film has also opened doors and possibilities for presentations and discussions within academia, there is still insufficient recognition of film as an effective way of communicating research results within academia. A film is perceived as an additional output and "nice to have," but certainly not as a stand-alone research product. Researchers have to be aware of this fine balance between crossing the boundaries of academia and the demands of scientific publications. At the same time, academic institutions should increasingly acknowledge and maybe also capitalize on the skills of their staff who engage in inter- and transdisciplinary work. They should not judge academic excellence only on the basis of publications in academic journals (also BACKHAUS, 2008). [46]

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