

AROUND THE CAMPFIRE - RESILIENCE AND INTELLIGENCE

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LAPIN YLIOPISTO
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Niva to Nenets: The making of a road-movie as a strategy for inclusive knowledge sharing

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Abstract

Niva to Nenets is an interactive road-movie that questions gift-giving and other possible pitfalls along the proverbial road to decolonization. It is part of an artistic research project that explores how art-making can inquire, discuss and encourage decolonization processes. A road-trip from Belgium towards Arctic Russia in a Lada Niva facilitated conditions for interesting circumstances and conversations. To legitimize a focus on us-and-them dichotomies and on the approach of artists working with indigenous peoples, the premise of this road-movie is my intention to give my Niva to the Nenets. As a reindeer herding people in the north-west of Russia, the Nenets struggle from the effects of accelerated climate change, rapid modernization, and the impacts of oil- and gas exploration on their herding grounds. The idea of giving them an old car, despite the fact that the usefulness of this gift was confirmed by the Nenets organization Yasavey, gave entrance to the sharing of many opinions, concerns and other responses. These responses are recorded with GoPro-camera's, and, combined with recordings of the travel, form the content of an experimental documentary that balances between coherent storytelling and two basic conditions of decolonization: freedom of opinion and freedom of action.

Author keywords

Interactive storytelling; road-movie; knowledge sharing; participatory practices; decolonization processes; gift-giving.

Introduction

Niva to Nenets is a case study within my doctoral research project *Towards Togetherness: Probing as a Decolonizing Approach for Artistic Inquiry*, which was defended in 2018.¹ The concept design of the case study leans heavily on the main goal of the PhD project: to experiment with conditions for knowledge sharing through an artistic and media-technological approach. This experimental approach, which can be considered the working method,² unveiled both possibilities and burdens for the transfer of knowledge. In this practice based paper, I first share some insights from the followed path of knowledge sharing. Then the road-movie as a genre, beneficial conditions of travelling, and some reflections on the act of recording are discussed. Further I explain how and why I assembled interactive trails throughout a collection of recorded scenes. A focus on possible colonial conditions of media use clarifies the experimental narrative structure and leads to the concluding argument that preserving openness towards multiple perspectives and opinions while building a coherent story is a balancing act.

The path of knowledge sharing

In my art practice I search for artistic ways of sharing knowledge through new media use. I approach knowledge as a qualitative, unmaterialistic commodity. Knowledge can be tacit or formal, private or public, local or global. Memories, concerns, understandings, values, habits, expressions, skills and stories all contain knowledge. My art projects tend to mediate between people and/or between different kinds of knowledge. Therefore, I allow and encourage multiple viewpoints: first during the participatory practices that inquire for knowledge and second within the media use that communicates the outcomes of these practices. I am motivated by the idea that the act of expression and shared activity can build a bridge where people can meet in between worldviews. For the *Niva to Nenets* project, I wondered how a road-movie can create a path for sharing knowledge, as the foundation of this metaphorical bridge.

¹ The *Niva to Nenets* road-movie can be watched online at: www.nivatonenets.org.

² I believe it is necessary in practice-based research, in research *through* art instead of *about* art, to think *from* the practice. Therefore, in comparison to (most) scientific texts, my writing is more personal than formal, with lesser references, as it specifically departs and shares from my art practice instead of the arts in general.

Road-movie

According to Danesi's Dictionary of Media and Communication, a road-movie is a film genre in which the main characters leave home to travel from place to place, typically altering the perspective from their everyday lives (2015, p. 256). The protagonist often makes a mental journey as well, and is in search for something or undergoes important life-lessons. The *Niva to Nenets* project fits well within this genre, as it tells the story of my attempts to handle a decolonizing approach. In order to do so, I need to handle a stressful attitude, the wish for things to be perfect, and good but foolish intentions as I want to support an indigenous family by giving them an old car. Within the road-movie genre, the travel itself is often more important than the destination. Along the way, meetings, circumstances and other encounters challenge the protagonist and somehow changes him or her before the arrival. In *Niva to Nenets*, participating co-drivers and people I meet during public events in Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Finland³ respond to my intentions and influence the course of action by their concerns and advise. In the second half of the road-trip a tipping point is reached. I am no longer playing out the role of a benefactor when local people safeguard the more challenging parts of the travel. Instead, I am the one who is taken care of. When I finally arrive on the Yugorsky tundra, a peninsula below the Novaya Zemlya islands that can only be reached by helicopter, I am impressed by the words of the oldest man of the reindeer herding families that I visited. In response to my question if and how people of Western Europe can help him to continue his traditional livelihood, he states that they are not in need of anything as long as they can continue to have access to the land. By then, the Lada Niva is broken down for the third time. Remembering the urgent advice given to me during one of the public events, that I should not stick to my initial intentions against the wishes of the local people, I follow the strong request of Yasavey⁴ to ship the car back to Belgium. Sharing knowledge about and appreciation for the Nenets culture turned out to be the strongest gift that I was able to give.

Travelling to inquire

The long road-trip was an on-going experience that brought many challenges and opportunities for me to change, but to inquire for knowledge too. In order to emphasize the lived knowledge of people who experience challenges of decolonization on a daily basis, I invited specific people to travel parts of the trip with me. Cunera Buijs, who travelled with me from The Hague to Copenhagen, is curator Arctic regions at the Dutch National Museum of Ethnology and is involved in several repatriation projects. Kulunnuaq (Kulu) Petersen, a Greenlandic psychology student, travelled with me from

³ You can read more about the strategy of these public events, called *Picnic-Quizzes*, in my doctoral thesis at: www.towardstogetherness.org.

⁴ Yasavey (meaning *Guide who knows the terrain* in Nenets language) is the Nenets support organization of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug: www.yasavey.com.

Copenhagen to Stockholm together with the author Iben Mondrup who grew up in Greenland. They both experienced us-and-them dichotomies strongly, and were not shy to express their opinions on contemporary situations. Anna and Anders Sunna joined me from Stockholm to Mariehamn. Their Sami identity is strongly defended in Anders' art. Svetlana Usenyuk, a designer and researcher with a focus on co-creation and Nenets' transport vehicles, travelled with me from Helsinki to St. Petersburg. For the final part, from St. Petersburg to Naryan Mar, I hired Alexey Platova to drive me. Alexey is Komi and married to a Nenet. The project's schedule created an opportunity to spend approximately three days with each participating co-driver, instead of only a fraction of that amount of time that is usually provided for a regular interview. While travelling together, shared activities such as unpacking and repacking the car added to a temporary feeling of togetherness (see Figure 1). The sun, appealing landscapes, the distance from home, and of course the act of traveling brought us in a holiday mood that shifted the perspective from our everyday lives.



Figure 1. Re-packing the Niva with Anders Sunna after a public event in Stockholm. I experienced such activities as bounding and beneficial to temporary feelings of togetherness.

Recording to share

Media use can be put in practice to the benefit of decolonization processes, as it can support knowledge sharing. Fay Ginsburg (2002) underlines how both indigenous media and ethnographic film intend to communicate about social or collective identity in order to mediate across gaps of space, time, knowledge,

and prejudice. Mediation, she defines from the American College Dictionary, is “to act between parties to effect an understanding, compromise, reconciliation” (p. 216). But if one aims to decolonize his or her actions, it is important to avoid power imbalances during all stages and actions. Thus, I tried to give the participants as much agency over the recordings as I had. A maximum of five GoPro’s were attached inside the car to record our conversations from different view-angles, while two cameras were attached on the roof rack for recording the exterior. During the public events, the participants handled the GoPro’s themselves (see Figure 2). Although much footage turned too wobbling or otherwise too inferior to use, I prefer this kind of recording for future projects. Besides the fact that the recording itself becomes more inclusive, I prefer not to interfere the present moment with the presence of big camera’s and non-participating people who operate them.



Figure 2. GoPro’s on a stick in use by the participants of the public event in The Hague.

The fact that I was recording a movie gave people the possibility to share and transfer knowledge about their culture. While we were waiting to board the ferry towards the Åland archipelago, Anders told me the reason why he and his wife agreed to participate in the project: “Maybe we get our voice heard. Because some things are going on in Sweden and it doesn’t get out to the rest of the people. About our problems and stuff like that”.

For the Nenets in Russia too, the presence of a Westerner with recording cameras created the possibility to have their voice heard and their culture known. For example, I was invited to spend two days with the performance group Ханебцѣ (pronounced *Ghanebtsjeh*, means snow owl in Nenets language) on the tundra close to Naryan Mar, to record their rehearsals. Ханебцѣ is a group of mainly women, under the guidance of Ludmilla Boulugina, that promotes the Nenets culture through their performances.

There was not always an interpreter available during our recordings, but on some occasions I considered this beneficial as it created an open canvas for this group. With almost no guidance or questioning, they freely chose what and how they wanted to share in front of the cameras. For example, they showed and explained their traditional clothing, sung Nenets songs and performed local stories. Ludmilla appreciated the possibility to share knowledge of Nenets culture through the medium of film. "The more people know about our culture, the better," she said. Alexander Belugin, director of the Nenets organisation Yasavey, confirmed that a broader understanding of the Nenets culture contributes to the availability of the tundra for the reindeer and the herders. Media attention can thus support the continuation of their livelihood and culture.

Interactive trails

More than 350 hours of film footage was recorded during the road-trip. Besides the contributions of Ханебцё, these recordings include explanations and frustrations of Anna and Anders Sunna about the contemporary situation for the reindeer herding Sami in Sweden, an introduction to the Sami gift-giving system (*Láhi*) by one of the participants of the public events, experiences from the colonial school system on Greenland by Kulu Petersen and Iben Mondrup, and much, much more. As the improbability of watching everything motivates exploration, the sheer volume of selected recordings was deliberately kept extensive in an ultimate selection of still more than 200 meaningful scenes. These scenes are represented in the shape of a medley, as a cloud of slightly moving colourful dots (see Figure 3). From here, each colour leads to a storyline with a specific focus: the yellow line discusses issues related to gift-giving and decolonization processes (see Figure 4), the blue line tells about the Niva, the green line tells about the Nenets, the purple line shows the changing landscapes through musical scenes, and the red line focuses on my personal adventure. Some scenes are part of two storylines, enabling viewers to switch from one line to another (see Figure 5).

In order to follow your own trail throughout the extended collection of scenes, it is possible to choose a storyline, the scenes within this storyline you want to watch, and in which order. In case the scene was recorded with multiple cameras, you can also switch between viewpoints during playback (see Figure 6). You can activate an informational layer on top of the screening, which shows a map of the location of recording, GPS coordinates, the date, time and a length, and a short description of the scene (see Figure 7). Altogether, this interactive narrative structure enable viewers to explore the collection of scenes for five minutes, or up to five hours.

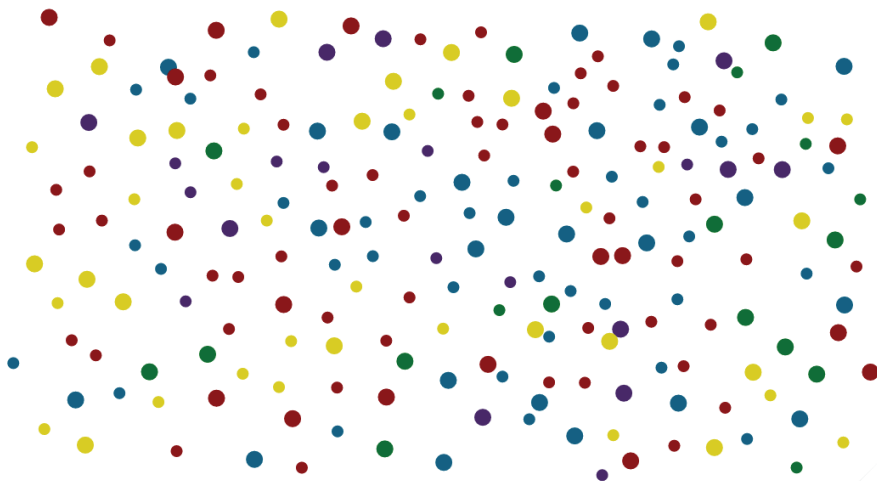


Figure 3. All scenes within the *Niva to Nenets* road-movie are represented as coloured dots in a cloud. Clicking on a yellow dot will automatically open the represented scene within the yellow storyline, a blue dot within the blue storyline, and so forth. Each storyline has its own focus: the yellow line discusses issues related to gift-giving and decolonization processes, the blue line tells about the Niva, the green line tells about the Nenets, the purple line shows the changing landscapes through musical scenes, and the red line focuses on my personal adventure.

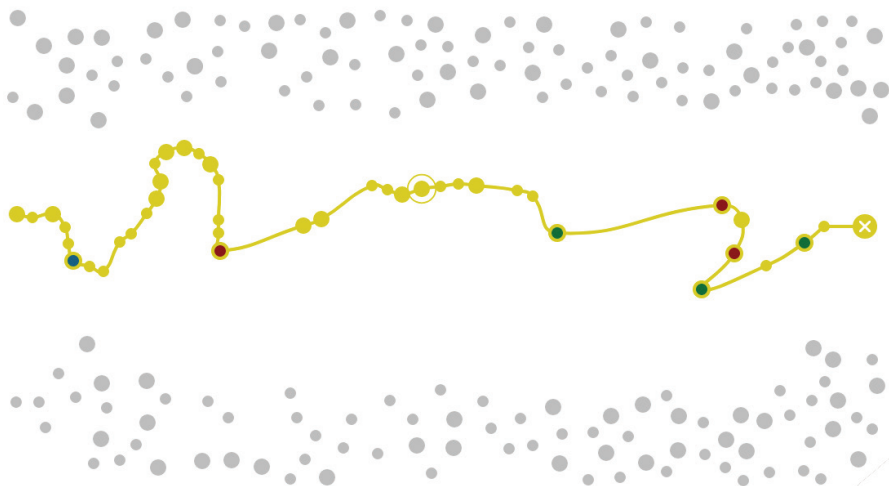


Figure 4. The scenes that focus on the discussed issues are grouped within the yellow storyline. The dots that represent inactive scenes move aside and lose their colour. Dots that are part of two storylines have two colours. After the playback of a scene, one can choose to open another scene within the storyline, to close the storyline to go back to the cloud, or to wait until the system automatically opens the next scene in order.

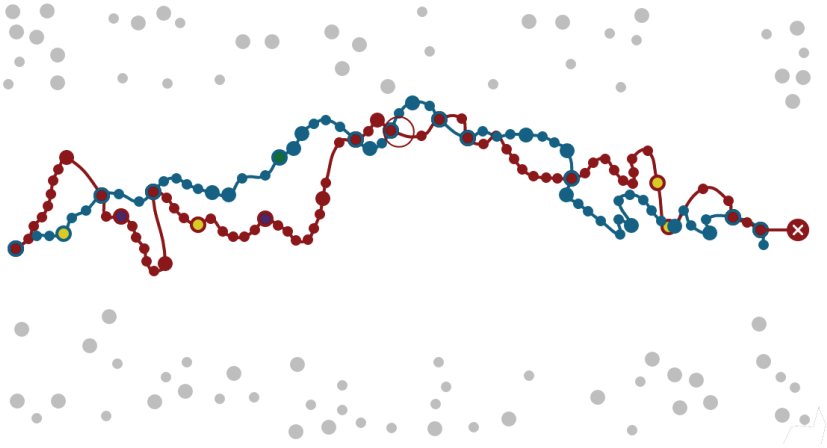


Figure 5. If one scene is part of two storylines, both storylines will become visible after playback. It is now possible to switch from one line to another. Alternatively, one can close the active storylines to go back to the cloud and open another one from there.



Figure 6. In case the scene was recorded with multiple cameras, you can switch between viewpoints during playback. A selected small viewpoint will then change position with the bigger, central spot. In this scene within the yellow storyline (which focusses on the discussed issues), Anders Sunna talks about racism in Sweden.



Figure 7. The navigation design of the *Niva to Nenets* road-movie enables you to activate an informal layer on top of the screening. This layer contains a map of the location of recording, GPS coordinates, the date, time and length, and a short description of the scene. It also gives information about the active storyline and, in case co-drivers are present, a short introduction.

In media use, I believe, one should try to avoid colonizing influences during the handling of recorded footage. Even unconsciously, many aspects of the dominating Western worldview can influence the movie-making during montage, for example in storytelling, as David MacDougall (1987) pointed out: "The dominant conflict structure of Western fictional narratives, and the didacticism of much of Western documentary, may be at odds with traditional modes of discourse. The division into fiction and documentary may itself be subversive. Or differences may arise in the convictions of narrative and imagery" (p.58). The *Niva to Nenets* project searched for a representation of the recordings that bypasses traditional modes of discourse, which are, according to MacDougall (1987), possibly colonial. A viewers' understanding arises from a relational network in which different bits of knowledge connect and validate one another. In film montage this is known as the Kuleshov effect that proves how reflective thought grows out of the interaction between sequential shots. Dewey (2012/1910) states that "reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a *consequence* — a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors" (p. 2). As the order of scenes influences the reflective thought of the viewer, this consequently might be a colonial thought in case the editor acts from the dominating Western worldview.

In an attempt to bypass the consequences of a fixed order of scenes, the narrative structure of the road-movie motivates viewers to choose their own order of viewing and literally change perspective. This 'freedom of action' does not merely motivate 'freedom of opinion', but it tries to avoid (unconscious)

opinion-making from montage. However, I needed to give viewers guidance to keep their explorations of the recorded material meaningful. Just presenting the enormous amount of footage, in the condition as it was brought home from Russia, would make no sense. Similar to montage, I therefore needed to decide which recordings would become scenes, and which of these scenes could be grouped to share for example an aim on the Niva, the Nenets, or the issues that were discussed. As some scenes turned relevant in two groups, they were given two colours within the representation of dots and (story)lines, which is described above. In result, they get more attention and are thus viewed more often. To guide the viewers a bit more, I indicated a scale: dots representing scenes that I find more meaningful are a bit bigger. Although the aim on exploration empathises a freedom of action, this freedom is limited in order to give some guidance. As soon as one chooses to click on one dot instead of another, the activated storyline insurmountably leaves out others. In interactive storytelling, I therefore believe, one has to find a balance between freedom of action on the one hand, and a guided storytelling experience on the other. The difficulty lies within the fact that one does not design for just one audience: some people prefer more influence of their actions than others. Thus, one should not guide too stringent, but not too loose either.

Conclusion

In an attempt to contribute to decolonization processes, the *Niva to Nenets* artistic research project investigated some aspects and possibilities of media use. I explored how the making of a road-movie can be inclusive to a broad spectrum of opinions and worldviews. The recording stage, which included the act of travelling, was supportive to the sharing of knowledge. The premise of the road-movie gave enough meaning and direction to the conversations while the approach stayed open towards discordant viewpoints. This resulted in a myriad of responses, which were sometimes contradicting. The editing stage, which included the selecting and arranging of scenes from the bulk amount of recordings, unveiled the importance to find a balance between exploration and narration. A navigational 'freedom of action' was consciously crafted to counterbalance the constraints of the necessary guidance to ensure a narrative experience. In an attempt to safeguard enough 'freedom of opinion', I tried not to force my way of seeing things upon the viewers while building an interface that allows viewers to define their own translation throughout the represented reality.

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