



FILMMAKERS AS “RECONCILIATORS”: THE VIDEOLETTERS PROJECT

An interview with Eric van den Broek

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This interview with the Dutch documentary-maker Eric van der Broek is an account of how the media, instead of inciting or aggravating conflicts within nations or misguiding international perceptions, can sometimes help heal deep emotional wounds in concrete ways.

The rules are only six, and they are all posed as a kind request: if you intend to record a videoletter, *please, do not discriminate against an individual or a group because of their race, beliefs or ethnic affiliation. Please, do not insult or threaten someone, either directly or indirectly. Please, do not spread false rumors, or accuse anyone of a criminal act. Please, do not make false representations and statements. Please, do not be obscene or spread offensive material. Please, do not promote or engage in any form of commercial or political activity.* But what is a videoletter?

In 1997, Eric van den Broek and Katarina Rejger were making movies for the Dutch television about the consequences of the Balkan wars. While editing material at a TV facility in Bosnia, they realized that their Bosnian colleagues were deeply interested in seeing their rough material originated in other parts of the former Yugoslavia: they wanted to know about the “others”.

In acknowledging that need, the filmmakers came up with the idea that gave rise to what has now grown to become a unique set of strategies and tools to facilitate reconciliation. A person who had lost contact with a lover, a friend or a neighbor from a different ethnic group in the course of the Balkans war would be invited to record a message for that lost dear somebody, and van der Broek & Rejger, acting as “postmen”, would trace the addressee and try to deliver the message.

During a phone interview, van der Broek explains that the project has evolved through three different stages. They began with one videoletter in

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1999. Sasha, the son of a Serb who was then working with van den Broek and Rejger, helping them with translations, agreed to record a message addressed to Emil, the son of a Muslim that had fled to the Netherlands in the advent of the war. Both friends exchanged videoletters, slowly clarifying their mutual fears and assumptions, and ultimately met in person for the first time in ten years. “Emil and Sasha” then became the first episode of the Videoletters TV series, which has now reached twenty 25’ episodes.

van der Broek recalls how Rejger & him initially went from organization to organization, at the very moment in which the former Yugoslavia was being rebuilt, trying to raise the funds they needed to make more videoletters: “why not reconstruct souls?”, was their argument. However, it turned out that the amount of money they were asking for was too high an amount for donors, and therefore changed their approach. Eventually they managed to produce eight episodes, on a one-by-one basis, each funded by a different donor. Those episodes constituted the project’s first stage.

The second stage came when the British embassy in Belgrade contacted the couple and expressed interest in funding 12 additional episodes. The embassy’s support led to five years of continued work, during which the filmmakers have been able to complete the series (although two of the twenty episodes, which are second parts of two existing ones, are not yet edited to date).

Once they had the funding in place to produce the videoletters, van der Broek & Rejger started working on the broadcasting aspect. They aimed at the public TV stations in each of the seven nations that had constituted the former Yugoslavia –Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia- and, in the process of contacting them, found out about an upcoming meeting in which they all were to reunite for the first time after the war. The filmmakers obtained permission to make a presentation of the project during that meeting: “We didn’t say much, but we showed them a compilation of the videoletters. They all got very emotional. And the very same afternoon they decided that 10 episodes would be broadcast simultaneously”, said van der Broek.

Asked about the actual process of having the videoletters made, van der Broek explains that it was difficult to find stories: “especially since you need different personal stories”, he says. “Initially we set up a research team with members in every country to work together in finding people that would be interested in recording a videoletter, but it didn’t work. People there in general do not trust anybody. And we came to realize that the only solution would be to do it ourselves, Katrina and I”, describes van der Broek. “We set up our own network, going from place to place... There

were two and a half million encounters to be facilitated, but coming up with just twenty was really hard”.

When asked about the relationship Rejger & him as filmmakers established with the authors of the videoletters, van der Broek explains: “We had to convince them that we were trustable. And we always said that we didn’t know what we were going to do with the material, we are only postmen”. First interviews were long, and people were asked about everything. van der Broek says that the couple made it a point to always ask about each person’s individual responsibility before and during the war. A common question was: “did you vote for Milosevic?”.

According to the filmmaker, “it was much easier to go to the other side to deliver the videoletter. People were always curious”. And over time, the fact that van der Broek & Rejger traveled back and forth delivering the exchanges of videoletters, “always returning”, created a lot of trust. They became ‘relevant others’, and have kept in touch for five years, says van der Broek. Moreover, in his view, the fact that Rejger & him are not only partners but also lovers, related at an emotional level, built additional trust.

The filmmakers made a specific commitment with the people they engaged with in the process of filming: “if and when a chance to broadcast the material appears, we will show you the episode first, for you to comment”. van der Broek says that Rejger & him were aware that in some cases people could be harmed by a broadcast.

To date, fourteen episodes have been broadcasted in Serbia: eight were shown by the public station, and the rest were shown by B92 [1]. In Croatia, only eight have been broadcasted so far, “out of fear”, says van der Broek. But before the broadcasting started, the series premiered in Sarajevo, on April 2 2005. All the people portrayed in the series were invited: “they came to Sarajevo at our own cost. We told them that we wanted to introduce them as the heroes of this project, because without them it would not have been possible. Most of them did not know each other. But very soon they all wanted to see each others’ episodes. It was moving to see these former enemies, surrounded by their families, sitting together and sharing their handkerchiefs”, says van der Broek.

Videoletters has by now grown into “a huge reconciliation project”, in van der Broek’s words, although it remains very strongly connected to filming.

What was originally a small website has evolved into a powerful tool, designed to be owned by the people in the former Yugoslavia region, including a system of telephone help-lines [2] and slots through which

people can pose their questions, express their views, or learn how to make their own videoletters.

While reactions to the current website are being studied in order to make improvements, a Videoletters caravan [3] is touring the region, organizing video screenings and concerts –a music band is actually part of the team- and working with children via schools. van der Broek speaks proudly of “The young journalists”, a project within the project that encourages children 12 to 16 years old to go out and interview their parents, grandparents and teachers, asking them the following question: “Would you like to reconcile?”. The filmmaker explains that in several towns “parents came to us to thank us for the opportunity this question gave them to talk with their kids about things they never talk about”.

Plans include a thorough evaluation of the whole project, analyzing for instance broadcasting ratings as well as audiences’ reactions, with the aid of an international team of students that will participate in the research. van der Broek explains that “broadcasts are mainly successful abroad, but not in the former Yugoslavia”. In his words, “it is very painful for people to watch the videoletters and understand what their own position is”, and the Videoletters team would want to know more about how that process has been working so far. Rejger and him have been requested to replicate the project in Africa –in Burundi, in Russia, and also in Palestine and Israel, and to be able to train people –“new Erics and Katarinas”- they need proper feedback.

van der Broek states that as a filmmaker he remains aware of the mass potential of television broadcasts, and of his ethical duty regarding audiences in that sense: “people that you don’t know will watch what you do, and you must take responsibility for that”.

Coining the term “reconciliators” to describe the work that Rejger & him have been doing in the last five years together with the Videoletters team, he affirms: “I have come out of the process a better person”.

To learn more about the project and see some of the videoletters, you are welcome to visit www.videoletters.net

[1] B92 was founded in 1989 as a youth radio broadcasting to Belgrade audiences and has since grown into a company which includes a regional radio and a national television network, a web site and an Internet providing service, a book-publishing department, a CD label and a cultural centre, Rex. For more information visit <http://www.b92.net/english/>

[2] As stated in the Videoletters website, “Videoletters Helplines are for people who experience strong emotions or traumas after seeing Videoletters episodes”. The helplines are open after each broadcast in the former



Yugoslavia region.

[3] Again as stated in the Videoletters website, "buses equipped with Internet connections and webcams are crisscrossing the countries of the former Yugoslavia in order to allow people to record their own videoletters and post them on the project's website".

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